

A Biblical Perspective on Homosexuality

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Society's views on homosexuality have changed dramatically over the last few decades. Historically in America, homosexuality was viewed as a taboo subject, seldom talked about in society and even less discussed in the church. When homosexuals were portrayed in the media, they were generally treated with mockery or revulsion and considered to be perverted or immoral. Today, a sea change has taken place in society's perspective. The mainstream media – whether magazines, television or cinema – generally treat homosexuality as a normal and acceptable lifestyle, the expression of one's natural sexual identity. Those who speak out against a homosexual lifestyle are viewed as intolerant, bigoted and even evil. Identifying homosexual behavior as “sinful” is considered “hate speech” and viewed as promoting violence against a persecuted minority. Analogies are often drawn between homosexual rights and those of ethnic minorities, and the homosexual agenda is portrayed as a struggle for basic human rights, a part of the larger civil rights movement.

Many Christians don't want to talk about this issue because of its volatility or because it makes them feel uncomfortable. Emotions run high, with anger and hostility expressed on both sides. But Christians dare not respond with either hatred or indifference. Rather, we need to strive to discern God's will and design for human sexuality and address the issue of homosexuality in a fair, loving, and biblical manner.

Discerning God's Will in Scripture

One of the key issues in this debate is the role of Scripture. Some advocates of acceptance of a homosexual lifestyle claim that the Bible never addresses the question of faithful and loving homosexual relationships. Via argues that since Paul presumably held that there was one sexual nature (a heterosexual one), his condemnation of homosexual acts is based on the presumption that it violates the (heterosexual) nature of the person engaged in homosexual activity. He reasons that if Paul knew of persons oriented toward homosexual behavior, consistency would demand that expression of their natural inclination be seen as acceptable,

since it, like heterosexual activity for the heterosexually oriented person, does no violence to their nature.¹

Another approach is to argue that the few biblical passages which have traditionally been interpreted as prohibitions against homosexuality are in fact condemnations of sexual violence or pederasty. Such a view is taken by Spong, who maintains that the biblical texts have been largely misinterpreted.² Since the Bible never condemns homosexual behavior, it is argued, we should accept it as a natural God-given orientation to be celebrated rather than censured.

We shall see below that the Bible does in fact condemn homosexual behavior in general, not just rape, pederasty or perversion. But there is an even more fundamental problem with this argument. The Bible is not a quick answer book for every issue of life. The Bible says little or nothing explicit about a myriad of issues facing Christians today, including abortion, euthanasia, genetic engineering, gambling, drug addiction, environmentalism, nuclear weapons, pacifism, terrorism, and dozens of others. What the Bible does tell us is who God is and who we are in relationship to him. It tells how we were created to be in relationship with him and with one another, and what went wrong when humanity rejected God and entered a fallen state. It tells how God sent his Son Jesus Christ to redeem us so that we can be reconciled to God and to one another. From this basic awareness of who we are as God's people, we can draw conclusions about the kinds of decisions and behaviors which God honors, and those which he forbids. To answer questions about homosexuality, therefore, we cannot limit our discussion to the direct commands of Scripture, but must begin with fundamental questions related to our identity as psychological, social, spiritual and sexual beings in relationship with God and with one another.

Doing this necessarily means attending to hermeneutical questions. We must have an understanding of how the Bible functions as communication before we can begin to examine the specifics of any issue.

As noted above, the Bible is not an "answer book," but is, rather, God's word to his people. In the Bible, we don't simply have a collection of random texts. Rather, we have a collection of texts that have been recognized as possessing certain qualities and that, taken together, reflect a particular worldview.

¹ D.O. Via, "The Bible, the Church, and Homosexuality," in *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*, D.O. Via and R.A.J. Gagnon (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 15.

² J.S. Spong, *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 139-42. A similar view is put forth by J.J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*, 4th ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 59-60.

Another way of expressing this is to say that the Bible tells a story. It is a story of how God created the world and human beings in his image. Not being content with a God-given role of representing him in being stewards of creation, the first human beings sought instead to be “like God” and claim for themselves a position they could never obtain as it belonged to God alone. The tragic result of this was distance from (and even fear of) God, and the corruption of the created order.

In response to the sin of human beings, God chose Abraham and his descendants to be the people through whom he would work to set things right. Through Abraham’s descendants, all nations on earth would be blessed. The culmination of this plan is the ministry of Jesus Christ, a descendant of Abraham, whose death, resurrection, exaltation, and return enables and ensures the restoration of creation through the establishment of his kingdom and the creation of the new heavens and the new earth.

Understanding this overarching meta-narrative is important in evaluating some of the biblical data related to homosexuality. The priorities and direction of creation, as portrayed in Scripture, help us to better understand what God’s intentions and desires are.

God’s Design for Human Sexuality (Genesis 2:18-24)

The parallel creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 set the stage for all that follows in Scripture. It is the beginning of the story (the metanarrative) of God’s interaction with humanity. Chapter one provides a summary overview of creation, teaching that humanity – made up of male and female in relationship with one another – is created in God’s image as the pinnacle of his creation:

So God created human beings in his own image
in the image of God he created them;
Male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:27 TNIV)

The second creation narrative in chapter two focuses in on the distinct creation of man and woman and their complementarity.³ Adam is incomplete alone (“it is not good for the man

³ The use of this term is not intended to take a particular side in the current evangelical debate over the relationship between men and women in the church and home. Both perspectives on that debate are represented among the faculty and

to be alone”; 2:18) and so God creates Eve, a “companion who corresponded to him ” (2:20 NET). Eve is made from Adam’s rib and together they make complete humanity. Adam concludes,

This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken out of man.

It is difficult to overstate the significance of this for the present discussion. In the pre-fall state, which is said to be “perfect,”⁴ (Gen. 1:31) God determines that the most suitable companion for Adam is someone different from, yet complementary to, him. God’s gracious gift of a suitable companion comes after Adam’s realization that no other creature would be able to meet his needs (v. 20). The perfect complement for Adam (and the resolution of his loneliness) was Eve.

The narrator then pronounces the God-ordained relationship between the two: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” The language of leaving parents and uniting with a wife confirms the establishment of a new covenant relationship which supercedes clan or parental allegiance. Becoming “one flesh” indicates both the spiritual bond and the act of sexual intercourse which consummates this covenant relationship, and is the sign of that established covenant. As the foundational creation account, the passage establishes God’s purpose and parameters for human sexuality: God meets the man’s need of companionship by creating a woman. The result is a monogamous heterosexual marriage relationship and the completion of the image of God. This is the God-ordained pattern for human sexuality. The implication of the passage is that any other sexual relationship outside of these parameters – whether adultery, homosexuality, polygamy, pederasty, incest or bestiality – is contrary to God’s purpose for human relationships.

students at Bethel University, and one’s stand on that issue does not necessarily impact one’s position on the morality of homosexual behavior.

⁴ The sense of “perfection” comes from the use of the absolute superlative of degree as well as the emphatic use of *hinēh*. See B.K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 268 and G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary Series 1 (Waco: Word, 1987), 34.

Advocates of the homosexual lifestyle sometimes argue that homosexual relationships are not mentioned in Genesis 1-2 because the concern is with procreation, not about sexual love.⁵ But as McNeill himself notes, the concern of Genesis 2 is on companionship. Thus the creation account in its present, canonical form (consisting of Genesis 1 and 2) deals with *both* procreation and companionship. The passage concerns the fundamental nature of the “suitability” of Eve as companion and helper for Adam, as well as the establishment of marriage as a divinely-ordained institution – the achievement of the image of God in the “one flesh” relationship between husband and wife. It is true, of course, as is sometimes noted by advocates of homosexual relationships, that this foundational text leaves much unanswered. Single people, for example, are not included in this discussion. Are we to conclude that theirs is a sinful lifestyle, since it falls short of the ideal described here? To put it another way, is the presentation of Adam and Eve here simply descriptive of one viable way of living and expressing sexuality, or is it prescriptive, indicating what is acceptable and suggesting that which is forbidden?

The programmatic nature of this text, as well as the understanding of the metanarrative of Scripture as a whole, suggest that this text is intended to be understood as prescriptive rather than simply descriptive. Human sin enters the perfect creation and it is marred almost beyond recognition. God then acts to redeem creation through the election and call of Abram, and his descendants. Ultimately, the goal of God’s redemptive activity is the restoration of creation through the creation of the new heavens and the new earth (see Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13). That the book of Revelation quite clearly casts the restored creation (the New Jerusalem) in terms reminiscent of the creation account points to the prescriptive nature of the creation account, as restoration of the idyllic state is the end to which God’s plan is seen as striving.⁶

Ultimately, however, these questions can be decisively answered only after an examination of the rest of the biblical witness. If the rest of the Bible could be fairly interpreted as condemning the single lifestyle, then we could conclude that perhaps the omission of that lifestyle should be taken as an implicit exclusion of that lifestyle. That, of course, is not the case.

⁵ McNeill, *Church and the Homosexual*, 60-61. McNeill notes that Genesis 1 (which is commonly assigned to the hypothetical source P in source-critical analyses of the Pentateuch) and Genesis 2 (typically assigned to J, which is understood as an earlier source) differ in their presentations. The P account, he argues, is focused on procreation, whereas the J account deals with companionship and loneliness. While a detailed examination of the issues surrounding the composition of Genesis is (obviously) well beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that, regardless of how the text got into its present form, the text as it presently exists sets forth an account of creation that is coherent as a whole, and whose parts complement one another.

⁶ On the parallels between the end of Revelation and the creation account, see Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 133-36.

We now must consider whether or not there is any additional evidence that would suggest that the exclusion of homosexual behavior from the creation accounts in Genesis is to be considered an indication that it is nevertheless acceptable.

Biblical Prohibitions against Homosexual Behavior

The programmatic nature of Genesis 2:18-24 means that there would need to be very strong biblical evidence to overturn its precedent. In fact, there is none. Unlike the single lifestyle, the Bible consistently and universally treats homosexual behavior as sin, contrary to God's purpose for human sexuality.

The Holiness Code (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13)

We will begin our examination with two texts in the *Torah*. The Hebrew word usually translated "law" is *tôrâh*. The connotations of the word, however, are much broader than the English word *law*. Whereas the word *law* is usually associated with the actions of legislatures, and brings to mind ideas of crime, punishment, courtrooms, and litigation, the Hebrew word *tôrâh* is better translated as "instruction" or "teaching." It is theologically centered instruction in the things necessary for the people of God to know in order to live a righteous life.⁷ Contrary to how *Torah* is sometimes conceived, it is not given as a set of rules to ensure an austere and joyless life. Rather, it is a gracious gift from the Creator to the people of Israel to help them to live out their lives in relationship with God.

The two texts in question here are part of that instructional material, found in the book of Leviticus. Though the English name of the book often leads people to conclude that what is contained in it is addressed to the Levites (ministers of God at the sanctuary), the opening verses of the book make clear that this is addressed not simply to the Levites and priests as a manual for them, but rather is addressed to all the people (Lev. 1:2).

What is called the holiness code of Leviticus is likewise addressed to the people as a whole (Lev. 18:2) as instruction in what is – and is not – acceptable behavior. It specifically condemns homosexual behavior. Leviticus 18:22 TNIV reads "*Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.*"

⁷ For more on this idea of *Torah* as instruction, see Peter Enns, "Law of God," *NIDOTTE*, 4: 893-400.

It is sometimes argued that the material in Leviticus deals with issues of purity, not holiness. Via maintains that “the unclean in uncleanness or impurity is disorder, confusion, the mixing of what should not be mixed.... The pertinent point here is that the condemnation of homosexuality in Leviticus categorizes it as a source of uncleanness rather than as a sin.”⁸ This claim, however, cannot be sustained. While there are, of course, purity laws in the legal codes of the Old Testament, the law concerning homosexual behavior is explicitly said to be “detestable” (tô^cēbâ). The use of this term points to its universal scope.

The term tô^cēbâ is used to refer to something that is detestable or repugnant to someone. The detestable nature is determined by the person’s character and values. For God to declare something to be “detestable” is to declare that belief or practice to be contrary to his character.⁹ The term is used elsewhere to refer to idolatry (Deut. 7:25, 13:14; 27:15), human sacrifice (Deut. 12:31), participation in the occult (Deut. 18:9-14), murder (Jer. 7:9), among other offenses. Moreover, its use in Proverbs is clearly universal, referring to “abominations” that are “not cultic nor are they Israel-specific.”¹⁰ These are not things that are culturally bound and therefore limited to that time and place, but are universal since God’s character does not change. The use of the term demonstrates that this law regulating homosexual behavior is dealing primarily with questions of holiness (and is therefore relevant in all times and cultures) not merely purity (which is restricted in its direct applicability to ancient Israel).

This may be further seen when considering the punishment for violating this prohibition in Leviticus 20:13. There, it says that both partners in the homosexual behavior are to be put to death for having committed a “detestable” act. Moreover, the text notes, “their blood will be on their own heads” (Lev. 20:13 TNIV). The fact that the punishment for violation of this statute is death suggests that it belongs to the realm of holiness, not simply purity. An Israelite who is made unclean through failure to obey the purity laws must be made clean through ritual washing and/or sacrificial offering (see Lev. 15:28-30). On the other hand, the death penalty obtains for serious violations of the covenant that threaten the very fabric of the relationship between Yahweh and his people. These offenses are apparently so threatening because they undermine in

⁸ Via, “Homosexuality,” 7.

⁹ Michael A. Grisanti, “תעב,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. W. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4.314-15.

some fashion the order established by Yahweh as creator. Idolatry, for example, denies Yahweh's unique role as the one true God, to whom worship is due. Murder usurps God's position as the creator and giver of life. Other actions described as detestable, including homosexual behavior, must be understood as being incompatible with Yahweh's character or a threat to his status as the one true God. Consequently, they cannot be dismissed as culturally-limited "Jewish" laws.¹¹ This is all the more clear as Leviticus 18:26 explicitly states that these laws are to be obeyed by both the Israelite *and* the foreigner living among the people of Yahweh.

Some maintain that it is inconsistent at best and hypocritical at worst to insist on adherence to the Levitical prohibitions on homosexual behavior while ignoring other prohibitions found in the Levitical laws (such as food laws, statutes regulating the types of fabric that can be worn, etc.).¹² But this objection overlooks the fact that certain laws, though expressing a universal principle that is relevant in all cultures and places, are presented in culturally limited ways. When encountering those laws, we need to ask how the universal principle should be expressed in different cultural settings. The point is that the principle is maintained, even if the cultural expression is altered.¹³ The principle underlying the prohibitions on homosexual behavior is that is a departure from the creational order established in Genesis and is contrary to God's character. That must be lived out by refraining from engaging in that behavior, in any culture or setting.

We should also note that it is a mistake to see the statutes in Leviticus 18 and 20 as dealing with cultic prostitution. There is nothing in the context that suggests that cultic prostitution is in view. This is seen first by the context, which is clearly dealing with sexual matters generally, not specifically sexual activities associated with cultic practice.¹⁴ Moreover, cultic prostitution is dealt with explicitly elsewhere (Deut. 23:17-18), and the terminology

¹⁰ Seth Goldstein, "Reading *Toevah*: Biblical Scholarship and Difficult Texts," *The Reconstructionist* 67,2 (2003): 49. See also Donald J. Wold, *Out of Order: Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 107-14.

¹¹ As suggested by John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 100-02.

¹² See Choon-Leong Seow, "A Hetertextual Perspective," in *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, ed. C.L. Seow (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 14-15.

¹³ For more on the interpretation of legal material in the Old Testament, see C.J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2004). See also Peter T. Vogt, *Interpreting the Pentateuch: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, forthcoming).

¹⁴ 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,

associated with that practice is lacking in Leviticus.¹⁵ The text is thus what it appears to be: guidance for the people of Israel as to how to live out their sexuality in ways that are pleasing to God and in conformity with his holiness.

Finally, we need to note the counter-cultural nature of the Levitical material. While attitudes toward homosexual activity differed somewhat within the various ancient Near Eastern cultures among which the Israelites lived, there are some commonalities. Some ancient laws, such as the Code of Hammurabi, make no mention of homosexual activity. The Middle Assyrian Laws prohibit someone from falsely accusing someone of frequently being the passive partner in homosexual intercourse.¹⁶ In addition, the code calls for castration of the active partner in instances of homosexual rape.¹⁷ Other ancient Near Eastern peoples condemned incestuous relations, but did not appear to condemn homosexual behavior more broadly. As Wenham notes,

the ancient Near East was a world in which the practice of homosexuality was well known. It was an integral part of temple life at least in parts of Mesopotamia, and no blame appears to have attached to its practice outside of worship. Those who regularly played the passive role in intercourse were despised for being effeminate, and certain relationships such as father-son or pederasty were regarded as wrong, but otherwise it was regarded as quite respectable.¹⁸

Thus the Levitical prohibitions must be seen as counter-cultural. The Levitical laws represent the only known general prohibition of homosexual activity in the ancient Near East. Both partners in homosexual intercourse are condemned in Leviticus 20:13, in contrast with practice elsewhere in the ancient world. The reason for this is because the Israelites are called to live out loyalty to a radically different kind of God. For Yahweh, the God of Israel, sexual relations between husband and wife is a blessing of creation, and any distortion of the sexual relationship is unacceptable.

2000), 149-64, rejects the notion that Canaanite cultic practice is primarily in view in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, though she argues that the “purity boundaries” established here are no longer relevant for the Christian.

¹⁵ It is often argued that Deuteronomy and Leviticus represent largely different sources (D and P respectively), which could account for the fact that the specific language for cultic prostitution appears in Deuteronomy but not Leviticus. But the Documentary Hypothesis has been subjected to serious criticism for some time, and not simply from those who take seriously the long-standing Jewish and Christian association of Moses with the authorship of the Pentateuch. For a recent critique of the Documentary Hypothesis and the state of scholarly understanding of the composition of the Pentateuch, see T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 7-94, and Gordon J. Wenham, “Pondering the Pentateuch: The Search for a New Paradigm,” in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, ed. David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

¹⁶ Middle Assyrian Laws (MAL) 19.

¹⁷ See MAL 20.

The Sins of Sodom and Gomorrah and the Men of Gibeah (Genesis 19 and Judges 19)

Another text that, tangentially at least, takes up the issue of homosexual behavior is Genesis 18, the account of God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham's nephew, Lot, offers hospitality to God's angelic messengers. The men of Sodom gather and seek to rape the visitors (Genesis 19: 5). Advocates of homosexual behavior rightly note that the primary sin in view here is not homosexual behavior, but rather being inhospitable. The specific form of inhospitality is rape, something especially violent and abhorrent, whether homosexual or heterosexual. So, they conclude, this passage has nothing to contribute to a biblical view of homosexuality.

While it is correct to note that homosexual behavior is not primarily in view here, this text still sheds some light on how homosexual behavior is viewed from a biblical perspective. This is because the author of Genesis deliberately seeks to cast the people of Sodom as utterly depraved. The preceding chapter highlights Abraham's intercession for Sodom, during which God promises to spare the city even if only ten righteous people are found in it. The subsequent destruction of the city, coupled with the description of "every" man, young and old, coming out to rape the angels, indicates that fewer than ten righteous people were present.

The depth of depravity of the men of Sodom is illustrated by their intense desire to rape the angelic visitors. In a cultural environment that placed an extremely high value on hospitality and expected hosts to do everything possible to protect visitors, seeking to do harm to the visitors is especially egregious. But that great offense is compounded when it is homosexual rape the men were seeking. As Wenham notes, "the homosexual intentions of the inhabitants of Sodom adds a special piquancy to their crime."¹⁹ By seeking to force on innocent visitors violent sexual activity that (even apart from the violence of rape) is depicted in the *Torah* as being "detestable" to God, the men of Sodom are demonstrating that they are utterly depraved, and therefore worthy of God's judgment.

That the offense of the men of Sodom includes a sexual dimension (and is not limited to inhospitality) is seen by the reference to the men of Sodom in the book of Jude. Jude notes that Sodom and Gomorrah "indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire," (Jude 7, ESV). Jude does not concentrate on the inhospitality of attempted homosexual rape, but rather

¹⁸ Gordon J. Wenham, "The Old Testament Attitude to Homosexuality," *Expository Times* 102, 12 (1991): 359-63. For a more detailed examination of ancient Near Eastern attitudes toward homosexuality, see Wold, *Out of Order*.

singles out the desire to engage in sexual relations with someone of the same sex.²⁰ The letter specifically notes that this is an evil act that is deserving of God’s condemnation.

The passage in Judges 19 is remarkably similar to Genesis 19. The author of Judges was seeking to demonstrate that the people of Israel, rather than living out total loyalty to God through adhering to the terms of the *Torah* as he commanded, have instead become just like the people of Sodom. Like the men of Sodom, the Israelites show their utter depravity by seeking to commit rape. The author of Judges viewed the actions of the men of Gibeah in the same way Moses viewed the actions of the men of Sodom – as an indication of their utter sinfulness.

Judges is explicit in condemning the intentions of the men of Gibeah as “disgraceful” (נִבְאָלָה). The Hebrew word is used elsewhere to refer to deviant sexual acts such as rape (Gen. 34:7), incest (2 Sam 13:12-13), fornication (Deut. 22:21), and adultery (Jer. 29:23). The use of נִבְאָלָה here suggests that the disgraceful act is not simply inhospitality, but includes a sexual dimension as well.²¹ That rape generally is not primarily in view is suggested by the fact that the host offers his own virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine to the men, allowing them to commit rape. What is particularly “disgraceful” is the fact that it is homosexual rape. It is, to be sure, a violation of hospitality but, as with Genesis 19, the offense is not limited to that.

Humanity’s Fallenness (Romans 1:18-32)

Romans 1:18-32 is the beginning of Paul’s argument in Romans that all human beings are sinful and fallen, deserving God’s condemnation.²² Although God has clearly revealed himself in creation, human beings have suppressed this knowledge. “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator...” (1:25). The result of this, Paul says, is that “God gave them over to shameful lusts” (1:26a). He then illustrates this with reference to homosexual behavior:

¹⁹ Wenham, “Old Testament Attitude,” 361.

²⁰ It will not do to argue that the “unnatural desire” Jude refers to is the desire to have sexual relations with angels, since the angelic visitors appear as men, and their true identity is unknown to the men of Sodom. Moreover, Genesis 6 makes clear that sexual union between angelic beings and humans (of any sex) is abhorrent to God, and is, indeed, the sin following which God determines to destroy the earth by flood. See Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 138-47.

²¹ Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, New American Commentary 6 (Nashville: Broadman, 1999), 536-37.

²² Though this section is directed primarily against pagan Gentiles, Cranfield points out that in v. 18 Paul uses the general term for people (*anthrōpos*) and nowhere in this sub-section does he use either “Gentiles” or “Greeks.” In describing humanity’s idolatry in v. 23, he echoes language from Ps. 106:20 and Jer. 2:11 which referred to Israel’s idolatrous behavior. The implication is that Paul views his description as ultimately pertaining to the sinfulness of all people (C. E. B. Cranfield, *A*

Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Rom. 1:26b-27 TNIV)

Paul's meaning seems clear: homosexual behavior is an example of the depravity which results from humanity's rejection of God. The phrase "gave them over" – repeated three times in this passage (vv. 24, 26, 28) – has sometimes been understood in the purely passive sense that God withdrew his influence and so allowed these individuals to receive the natural consequences of their sin. While sin's inevitable result is certainly part of the meaning, there is likely also a more active sense: "Like a judge who hands over a prisoner to the punishment his crime has earned, God hands over the sinner to the terrible cycle of ever-increasing sin."²³ Willful rejection of God provokes his judgment, which results in even greater depravity. In this case the depravity is manifested in a distortion of human sexuality. Homosexual behavior is a result of humanity's fallenness, not God's creative design.

Lest we identify homosexual behavior as somehow unique or the greatest of all sins, it should be noted that Paul goes on to list many other sins which result from our fallen state, including envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, slander, God-hating, insolence, arrogance, etc. (1:29-31). Paul probably singles out homosexuality for discussion because same-sex relationships so clearly represent a *distortion* of the created order established in Genesis 2:18-24.

Advocates of homosexual behavior object to this conclusion, claiming that Romans 1 only condemns "perversion" (acting contrary to one's "natural" sexual orientation) not "inversion" (acting in line with one's "natural" sexual orientation). John Boswell writes:

...the persons Paul condemns are manifestly not homosexual: what he derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons. The whole

Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans [International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975], 1:105).

²³ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996, p. 111.

point of Romans 1, in fact, is to stigmatize persons who have rejected their calling, gotten off the true path they were once on.²⁴

According to this view Paul knew nothing about inversion and so could not have addressed it here.²⁵ He is instead speaking about pagan sexual debauchery (like temple prostitution or the pederasty so common in the Greek world), not faithful, loving homosexual relationships. This is evident from the context, it is claimed, which concerns those who openly and defiantly reject God. This cannot apply to practicing homosexuals who love, worship and serve God.

This interpretation misrepresents what the passage actually says. Paul does not qualify the context in which these homosexual activities take place, but rather addresses the fundamental *nature* of the actions themselves. Heterosexual monogamous relationships are “natural” (*physikos*), while homosexual ones are “unnatural” (*para physin*), that is, contrary to God’s created order for human sexuality.²⁶ Boswell interprets *physikos* to mean what is natural for each person individually and *para physin* to go “beyond what is natural,” i.e., contrary to their own personal sexual orientation.²⁷ But this cannot be right. Paul does not say that “certain men abandoned their natural sexual orientation,” but rather, quite literally, that “*males (arsenes)* abandoned the natural use (*tēn physikēn chrēsēsin*) of the *female (thēlyōs)*.” (v. 27).²⁸ “Natural” is explicitly defined as heterosexual behavior.

Cranfield correctly notes that by *physikos* and *para physin* “Paul clearly means ‘in accordance with the intention of the Creator’ and ‘contrary to the intention of the Creator’,

²⁴ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 109.

²⁵ Boswell, *Homosexuality*, p. 109: “it is not clear that Paul distinguished in his thoughts or writings between gay persons (in the sense of permanent sexual preference) and heterosexuals who simply engaged in periodic homosexual behavior. It is in fact unlikely that many Jews of his day recognized such a distinction, but it is quite apparent that – whether or not he was aware of their existence – Paul did not discuss gay *persons* but only homosexual *acts* committed by heterosexual persons.” Walter Wink similarly asserts, “No doubt Paul was unaware of the distinction between sexual orientation, over which one has apparently no choice, and sexual behavior, over which one does” (“Homosexuals and the Bible,” in *Homosexuality and Christian Faith* (ed. W. Wink; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), p. 36.

²⁶ See Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion & Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), pp. 79-80, who cites classical and Hellenistic Greek evidence for the sense of “unnatural” for *para physin*.

²⁷ Boswell, *Homosexuality*, p. 112.

²⁸ Moo points out that Paul’s use of the antonymns *thēlyōs/arsēn* (v. 27) rather than *gunē/anēr* “stresses the element of sexual distinctiveness and throws into relief the perversity of homosexuality by implicitly juxtaposing its confusion of the sexes with the divine ‘male and female he created them.’” (*Romans*, p. 114).

respectively.”²⁹ J. D. G. Dunn similarly concludes that “Paul’s attitude to homosexual practice is unambiguous...a piece with and direct result of the basic corruption of the glory and truth of God in idolatry.”³⁰ Like premarital sex, adultery or pederasty, homosexual behavior is wrong by virtue of God’s design. The loving or faithful character of the relationship is irrelevant at this point. No one (we hope) would argue that pederasty (or adultery or incest) is acceptable if it occurs within a loving and faithful relationship.

Nor does the fact that many homosexuals claim to love and serve God mean that their actions are not sinful. Many people profess love for God and yet continue to sin, either intentionally or through self deception. The church at Corinth had members who claimed that their visits to prostitutes did not affect their spiritual state, but Paul strongly disagreed (1 Cor. 6:12-20).³¹ Jesus said those who truly loved him would obey his commands (John 14:15, 23, 24; 15:10; cf. 1 John 5:2, 3; 2 John 6).

Pauline “vice lists” (1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Tim. 1:9-10)

Two other references to homosexual behavior appear in the letters of Paul. Both of these are in lists or catalogs of sins common in the pagan world:

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes (*malakoi*) nor practicing homosexual (*arsenokoitai*) nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10 TNIV)

We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral and for those practicing homosexuality (*arsenokoitai*), for slave traders and liars and perjurers

²⁹ Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:125.

³⁰ J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Word Biblical Commentary. Vol. 38A; Dallas: Word, 1988), p. 74.

³¹ See G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 249-266. Fee summarizes the context of this passage: "Apparently some men within the Christian community are going to prostitutes and are arguing for the right to do so. Being people of the Spirit, they imply, has

— and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine... (1 Timothy 1:9-10 TNIV)

The term *malakos* (plural, *malakoi*) used in the first passage means “soft” and was used by the Greeks of the passive male partner in homosexual intercourse.³² The translation “male prostitutes” may be misleading, since it is at the same time too general and too specific. It is too general because a male prostitute may service females, but the Greek term refers only to male homosexual activity. It is too specific because the term does not necessarily mean a paid or coerced relationship.³³ The NET Bible more accurately translates *malakoi* as “passive homosexual partners.”

The meaning of *arsenokoitēs* (plural, *arsenokoitai*) has been the subject of considerable debate. The term is derived from two Greek words, “male” (*arsēn*) and “bed” (*koitē*), with the latter functioning as a euphemism for sexual intercourse.³⁴ Its most likely meaning is “sex with males,” a reference to homosexual behavior in general. When used with *malakos* it may refer to the active male partner.

R. Scroggs agrees that *arsenokoitēs* in 1 Cor. 6:9-10 means “sex with males,” but claims that in parallel with *malakoi* Paul has in mind “a very specific dimension of pederasty” where “effeminate call boys” (*malakoi*) serviced their male customers (*arsenokoitai*). These call boys were free (non-slave) youths or adults who sold themselves to individuals for the purpose of providing sexual gratification. This practice, Scroggs claims, was widely excoriated by Greco-Roman culture itself, and so Paul’s condemnation is not surprising or unusual. He concludes that “[Paul’s] words cannot be said to point to or exclude the general practice of homosexuality from the kingdom of God.”³⁵ Scroggs takes a similar interpretation of *arsenokoitēs* in 1 Timothy 1:9-

moved them to a higher plane, the realm of the spirit, where they are unaffected by behavior that has merely to do with the body” (p. 250).

³² For detailed evidence of this meaning here see Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice. Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), pp. 306-312; Fee, *First Corinthians*, p. 243; Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [BDAG] (rev. & ed. by F. W. Danker; 3rd ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 613.

³³ For a good discussion of the diversity of pederastic practices in the Greco-Roman world see R. Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality. Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), pp. 29-43. Scroggs, however, seems to exaggerate the difference between “effeminate call boys” and those who voluntarily entered into a pederastic relationship with an older man.

³⁴ BDAG, p. 554; Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, pp. 312-336.

³⁵ Scroggs, *Homosexuality*, pp. 40-43, 108-109. Cf. Mel White, “What the Bible Says – and Doesn’t Say – about Homosexuality” (booklet available at <http://www.soulforce.org/article/homosexuality-bible>), p. 18.

10, but sees another unique cultural situation evident from the sequence of terms Paul uses. These refer, respectively, to male prostitutes (*pornoi*), the customers who used them (*arsenokoitai*), and the slave traders who procured them (*andropodistai*). Scroggs concludes

that the vice list in 1 Timothy is not condemnatory of homosexuality in general, not even pederasty in general, but that specific form of pederasty which consisted of enslaving of boys or youths for sexual purposes, and the use of these boys by adult males.³⁶

Boswell interprets *arsenokoitēs* differently, claiming that it does not mean “sex with males,” but rather “male sex agents,” that is, male prostitutes.³⁷ Yet like Scroggs he concludes that Paul is not condemning homosexual behavior in general, but only specific exploitative sexual practices unique to the Greco-Roman context.

Contrary to these claims, it does not seem possible to limit *arsenokoitēs* to homosexual activity related to male prostitutes.³⁸ As Scroggs himself acknowledges, the rare word *arsenokoitēs* is almost certainly derived directly from the prohibition against homosexual activity in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, where the Septuagint uses the same two Greek terms which make up *arsenokoitēs*: “With a male [*arsēn*] do not lie on a bed [*koitē*] as with a woman; for that is an abomination” (Lev. 18:22; authors’ translation; cf. 20:13). Indeed, since 1 Corinthians 6:9 is the first appearance of *arsenokoitēs* in Greek literature, various scholars have suggested that Paul himself coined the term in intentional imitation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.³⁹ After discussing the significant parallels between Leviticus 18-20 and 1 Corinthians 5-6, De Young concludes that “By coining a term, Paul makes reference to homosexuality explicit, within a Jewish and Christian worldview. Other terms were too general (such as *porneia*) or reflected particular Greek forms of homosexual behavior (pederasty). By coining a term, Paul both narrowly defines

³⁶ Scroggs, *Homosexuality*, pp. 118-121. Quote from p. 120.

³⁷ Boswell, *Homosexuality*, p. 344.

³⁸ BDAG, p. 135: Paul’s strictures against same-sex activity cannot be satisfactorily explained on the basis of alleged temple prostitution...or limited to contract w. boys for homoerotic service.” Cf. De Young, *Homosexuality*, pp. 194-195. Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, p. 336, similarly concludes that, “The most that can be said for Scrogg’s position is the *arsenokoitai* here *might* have in mind *primarily* the most despicable form of homosexual conduct (viz., homosexual sex with boy prostitutes or one’s own feminized male slaves). Even if that concession were appropriate (and I doubt that it is), it would still not exclude a wider reference to all men who sleep with other males.”

³⁹ See D. F. Wright, “Homosexuals or Prostitutes: The Meaning of *ARSENOKOITAI* (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10)” *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984, pp.): 125-53, esp. 127-29; De Young, *Homosexuality*, pp. 195-96; Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow*, pp. 94-96; Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, p. 315.

what he means and propounds a theological construct that homosexuality is sin.”⁴⁰ In light of these parallels, it seems evident that for Paul *arsenokoitēs* is a general term for homosexual practice.

Several clarifications are important at this point. First, it is not true – as is often claimed – that the ancients had no conception of homosexual orientation, but only of homosexual actions. De Young notes that in Plato’s *Symposium*, a collection of speeches by several friends of Socrates on the subject of love, Aristophanes speaks of “men who...pursue the masculine... making friends with men and delighting to lie with them.... A man of this sort is at any rate born to be a lover of boys or the willing mate of a man, eagerly greeting his own kind.” Aristophanes goes on to say that “These are they who continue together throughout life, though they could not even say what they would have of one another.”⁴¹ De Young further notes that in Romans 1 Paul uses many terms which point to disposition and inclination, such as *reasonings*, *desires of the heart*, *shameful lusts* and *reprobate mind*.⁴²

While Paul does not explicitly distinguish between inclination and action, there is little doubt that he is here referring to the actions which are associated with a homosexual disposition. Shameful lusts result in women exchanging “natural relations for unnatural ones” and men committing “indecent acts with other men” (Rom. 1:26-27). In other words, Paul does not directly address the general orientation toward homosexuality which many people experience. Since today’s readers are far more attuned to the distinction between sexual orientation and sexual actions, Bible translators are wise to avoid the ambiguous term “homosexuals” (which could refer to a chaste and celibate person with a homosexual orientation) and render *arsenokoitai* instead with phrases like “practicing homosexuals” (NET, TNIV) or “[those who] practice homosexuality” (NLT², ESV).⁴³

⁴⁰ De Young, *Homosexuality*, pp. 198-99.

⁴¹ Plato, *Symposium* 191d-192c, cited by De Young, *Homosexuality*, p. 190.

⁴² De Young, *Homosexuality*, p. 191.

⁴³ Significantly, the 2004 revision of the *New Living Translation* revised the 1996 edition’s “homosexuals” to “those who practice homosexuality.”

Some Common Objections to these Biblical Prohibitions

Having examined the biblical evidence, we may turn to common objections raised by the homosexual community:

“Jesus, our ultimate model, never spoke out against homosexuality.”

Boswell argues that “Sexuality appears to have been largely a matter of indifference to Jesus. His comments on sexual mores are extremely few... He pronounced no condemnations of sexuality among the unmarried and said nothing which bore any relation to homosexuality.”⁴⁴

While it is true that Jesus never explicitly addressed homosexual behavior, this is not at all surprising. Jesus’ teaching primarily concerned the coming of the kingdom of God and the need to repent and respond in faith to God’s call. There are a host of behavioral issues that Jesus did not directly address, in which case we must assume that Jesus shared the same basic moral values as his Jewish contemporaries, revealed by God in the Old Testament.⁴⁵ No one would argue that because Jesus did not address issues like rape, incest, or bestiality, then he must have approved of these practices.

In fact, Jesus did *positively* affirm God’s intention for human sexuality when the Pharisees’ questioned him concerning grounds for divorce. In response Jesus denied that divorce was part of God’s plan and cited Genesis 1:27 and 2:4 to affirm God’s design for lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual relationships:

But at the beginning of creation God “made them male and female.”

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

(Mark 10:6-9 TNIV).

Jesus here directly links the creation of humanity as “male and female” in Genesis 1:27 to the institution of the marriage covenant in Genesis 2:4. It is distinctly as the union of husband and wife that two people achieve a “one flesh” relationship and reflect complete humanity. A

⁴⁴ Boswell, *Homosexuality*, p. 114.

⁴⁵ Boswell’s comment “that Jesus pronounced no condemnations of sexuality among the unmarried” (p. 114) betrays the weakness of his argument from silence. Surely Jesus would have shared the view of his contemporaries that sexual purity should be maintained prior to marriage. To suggest otherwise is to violate the most fundamental principle of interpretation: that a text must be read in its social and cultural context.

marriage or sexual partnership between two males or two females could not achieve this restoration of the image of God. Gagnon summarizes well:

Jesus, then, understood that marriage was ordained by God “from the beginning of creation” (10:6) as the union of a man and a woman, not of a man and another man, or a female and another female....The creation texts authorized only one type of sexual union. It would have been a foregone conclusion for him that homoerotic relationship and human-animal unions, both proscribed in Leviticus, were unacceptable. The whole point of Jesus’ stance in Mark 10:1-12 is not to broaden the Torah’s openness to alternative forms of sexuality but rather to narrow or constrain the Torah’s sexual ethic to disallow any sexual union other than a monogamous, lifelong marriage to a person of the opposite sex.⁴⁶

Nowhere does Jesus give the slightest hint that he approved of homosexual behavior. It would set a dangerous precedent to assume that Jesus’ relative silence on this issue (or any issue) may be used to overturn the uniform and unanimous biblical testimony. In any case, the exclusive appeal to Jesus’ teaching is unwarranted, since the Holy Spirit’s testimony through Paul and other biblical writers is equally authoritative as God’s Word.

“God made me this way, so my homosexual desires must be a good thing”

This objection raises the question of the causes of homosexual orientation, which are certainly complex and not fully understood. It seems likely that there are environmental factors, and that socialization can affect sexual orientation. Some research suggests that men with a weak father figure or over-bearing mother have a greater incidence of homosexuality. There may also be genetic factors or factors related to hormonal influence on the prenatal brain.⁴⁷

However, even if genetic factors are proven to be an issue, this does not legitimize homosexual behavior. The cause of *all sin* may be said to be “genetic” or inborn in that it is a

⁴⁶ Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, p. 194.

⁴⁷ The literature on the possible causes of homosexuality is enormous. See the surveys in Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Behavior*, pp. 395-432; John Money, *Gay, Straight, and In-Between: The Sexology of Sexual Orientation* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988); Simon LeVay, *Queer Science: The Use and Abuse of Research into Homosexuality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996); Edward Stein, editor, *Forms of Desire: Sexual Orientation and the Social Constructivist Controversy* (New York: Garland, 1990). For various Christians perspectives see S. L. Jones and M. A. Yarhouse *Homosexuality: the use of scientific research in the church's moral debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000); E. Moberly, *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic* (James Clarke, 1983); C. Burr, *A Separate Creation: How Biology Makes Us Gay* (Bantam, 1996); Schmidt, *Straight & Narrow?* pp. 131-159.

result of our fallen human nature. God did not make us this way. Rather, we inherited from Adam a natural inclination to sin: *“Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned”* (Romans 5:12 TNIV). Since Adam’s fall, we are all inclined to reject God, to act selfishly, to hate our enemies, to cheat on our taxes, to cheat on our spouses. Salvation is about being delivered from these fallen desires and given a new Spirit-empowered desire to pursue God. It is about exchanging our old sinful nature for a new redeemed one: *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”* (2 Cor. 5:17 TNIV). The simple truth is that we live in a fallen world and are all sinners. We all have sinful thoughts and desires. For some these are homosexual; for others they are heterosexual. In either case, God gives us the power to overcome temptation through the power of his Spirit.

No one would argue that a child molester’s “natural” inclination to have sex with children legitimizes their behavior. Rather, we would say that – whatever social or genetic factors produced these desires – God can transform them through the redemptive power of the cross and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

This brings up a very important point for those struggling with homosexual feelings. Homosexual desires in themselves are not sin. There is an important difference between a homosexual inclination or desire, and homosexual behavior. Many people experience incredible anxiety and guilt because of homosexual feelings. The church needs to reach out and help these people. Like all other temptations, homosexual desires become sin when they are dwelt upon or acted out (James 1:14-15). As James tells us, the key is not to let that desire give birth to sin, but to deal with it in a constructive manner. And the church has an important role to play in this regard. We will discuss this more below.

“God accepts me as I am, so you should as well.”

This objection is a distortion of the meaning of grace. It is certainly true God offers free and undeserved grace to the sinner. But the sinner is called to repent, to turn away from sin and to live a life pleasing to God. In his encounter with the woman caught in adultery, Jesus did not condemn her, but he tellingly commanded that she *“Go now and leave [her] life of sin.”* (John 8:11 TNIV) He did not accept her sin, he accepted *her*. Gagnon writes

In sum, the stories about Jesus' encounters with women who were considered sexual *sinner*s do not support the conclusion that Jesus was soft on sexual *sin*... He advocated mercy as a means of stimulating repentance and devotion to God ... He understood that those who were forgiven the most would stand a good chance of loving the Forgiver the most. Such people made excellent candidates for receiving Jesus' message about the coming kingdom and for obeying his teachings. Jesus forgave sexual sins, like all other sins, in the expectation of transformed behavior. They were to go and sin no more.⁴⁸

The evidence of a life transformed by the Spirit of God is a desire to please and obey him. The church is *not* made up of a bunch of sinners refusing to give up their sin, but redeemed sinners who have entered the new creation in Christ, and are now being transformed by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

“It is not fair that heterosexuals have a sexual outlet in marriage while homosexuals do not.”

We may begin by responding that God can certainly change a person's sexual orientation. Many former homosexuals are living happy and fulfilled heterosexual lives today.⁴⁹ But we must also acknowledge that God does not always change a person's sexual orientation, and many Christians continue to struggle with homosexual desires. And it would be wrong to suggest that such a change, though certainly possible for God to accomplish, is easy. A more complete answer is that temptation and frustration are a part of life for all of us. God does not always give us the things we desire, and prayers are not always answered the way we would like. The apostle Paul prayed that God would remove his “thorn” in the flesh – perhaps some persistent physical ailment – but God responded that “my grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor. 12:7-9).⁵⁰ The point is that we all have “thorns” – areas of weakness and struggle. Many Christians are called to lifelong singleness and celibacy. Others live in marriages where one partner cannot perform

⁴⁸ Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, p. 217.

⁴⁹ See for example, Bob Davies, *Portraits of Freedom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001); James R. Hill, “Change Is Possible, Stories of Ex-Homosexuals,” in *Staying the Course. Supporting the Church's Position on Homosexuality* (eds. Maxie D. Dunnam and H. Newton Malony; Nashville: Abingdon, 2003). Cf. the discussion in Schmidt, *Straight & Narrow*, pp. 153-158.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of the various possibilities concerning Paul's “thorn,” see Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), pp. 568-571. Though admitting we simply don't have enough evidence for a firm conclusion, Barnett slightly favors the view that the thorn was a relational rather than a physical one.

sexually. All Christians need to deal with whatever temptations come their way, living in obedience to God's Word. And God promises sufficient grace not just to survive, but to thrive in joyful contentment in him (1 Cor. 10:13). Singleness and celibacy are a God-ordained gift and option for many.

In any case, the argument from fairness will not get us very far, since life is never "fair" in the sense of "the same for everyone." Not everyone has equal abilities or opportunities. Some people are born with severe handicaps or deformities. Some suffer from debilitating diseases. Some die much too young. Life in this fallen world is not fair. Yet we are still responsible to God for what he has given us. We are still called to live lives of faith and obedience. Ultimately, our hope is not in the fairness of this world, but in the fairness of eternity, when God will reward all believers according to what they have done. We must remember that this life is preparation for an eternity lived in relationship with God as glorified human beings.

The Church's Response to Homosexuality

Having examined the biblical perspective on homosexuality, we may draw some conclusions on how the church should respond to this issue.

1. The Church must reject the claim that sexual sin of any kind represents acceptable behavior.

God's Word, not changing cultural norms, must be the foundation for our faith and actions. This means that *all* sexual sin, including homosexual behavior, must be rejected. Too often, Evangelicals have sought to highlight the sinful nature of homosexual behavior, while overlooking the rampant adultery and fornication that pervade society and even the church.

2. The Church must love and embrace its homosexually-oriented members.

We must reject homophobia (hatred or fear toward homosexuals), and love and support those struggling with homosexual desires. We must create an environment where people can openly discuss their feelings without shame or fear of rejection.

This means we must reject the notion (which is certainly unbiblical) that homosexual behavior is the worst sin, and see those Christians struggling with issues related to homosexuality as brothers and sisters in Christ, deserving of love and support. Too often, the Church has acted as if homosexual behavior is an unforgivable sin and, out of fear or loathing, rejected the person

struggling with this issue, even as the sinful behavior is rightly rejected. As believers we are called to put aside all anger and malice, and to love all people – even those who hate or persecute us (Matt. 5:44). We are also called to obey God’s commandments as an expression of our love for him (1 John 5:3).

3. The Church must seek to meet the needs of its homosexually-oriented members, providing resources for successful Christian living.

Perhaps the greatest need for homosexuals – and for all of us – is for supportive and caring interpersonal relationships in the context of true Christian fellowship. The church must intentionally work toward creating authentic Christian community, both in small group ministries and in larger church gatherings, where those wrestling with homosexuality experience Christ’s love and forgiveness in a nurturing environment with a goal toward spiritual growth and maturity.

The church must also provide the networks and resources to support its homosexually-inclined members. There are a many good books which deal with this issue. Bob Davies and Lori Rentzel’s *Coming Out of Homosexuality*⁵¹ provides help for dealing with temptation, coming to terms with one’s past, forming healthy relationship and considering marriage. Davies is executive director of Exodus International, an organization which helps practicing homosexuals come out of the gay lifestyle, and Rentzel is with Love in Action, the organization which aided Davies in his struggle to emerge from this lifestyle.

In addition to Exodus International, other organizations which minister to homosexuals include Cross Ministry (Tim Wilkins, executive director), Living Hope Ministries, Stephen Bennett Ministries, The Sight Ministry, National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), and the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission. These organizations all have websites which provide many additional resources.⁵² A large selection of books, pamphlets and videos related to homosexuality can be found at the Regeneration Books website (regenbooks.com). Every church should become familiar with these ministries and their resources.

⁵¹ Bob Davies and Lori Rentzel’s *Coming Out of Homosexuality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993).

4. *The Church must be a channel for God's love to a lost world.*

Christians who have adopted a gay lifestyle frequently speak of the rejection and hostility they felt from other Christians. One homosexual writes: "The church's record regarding homosexuals is an atrocity from beginning to end: it is not for us to seek forgiveness but for the church to make atonement." (Rictor Norton) We may disagree with the content of this statement, but we must not fail to hear the pain that lies behind it.

Ultimately we need to ask, "How would Jesus have responded to practicing homosexuals?" The answer, of course, is the same way he responded to all sinners. He would love them and offer them the free grace of God. He would call them to repent and to live lives of holiness and faith. Like the father of the prodigal son, Jesus waits by the road longing for his wayward children to return to him, because "*The Son of Man came to seek and to save, what was lost.*" (Luke 19:10)

Additional Resources

Timothy Bradshaw, Ed. *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997, 2003).

Maxie D. Dunnam and H. Newton Malony, Eds., *Staying the Course. Supporting the Church's Position on Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003).

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

Stanley J. Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming* (Louisville: Westminster, 1998).

James B. De Young, *Homosexuality. Contemporary Claims Examined in Light of the Bible and Other Ancient Literature and Law* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000).

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

⁵² Websites for these ministries can be accessed through the LifeWay website at <http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/mainpage/0,1701,M%253D200261,00.html>

Helpful annotated bibliographies on the biblical perspective on homosexuality can be found at http://www.ajgoddard.net/Ethics_Bibliography/Homosexuality/homosexuality.html and <http://www.jeramy.org/gay/gaybib.html>

Information about ministries to homosexuals may be found at:

<http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/mainpage/0,1701,M%253D200261,00.html>