

Same-Sex Marriage and Anglican Theology: A View from the Traditionalists

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Part 1

The Social and Ecclesiastical Context

Modern Western societies in North America and Europe are increasingly moving toward the acceptance of same-sex relationships. At first people were challenged to accept lesbian and gay partnerships on a political and legal level; but recently and more problematically, Christians are being asked to accept a redefinition of the institution of marriage itself. No longer is marriage to be regarded essentially as a bond between one man and one woman, but as a sexual relationship in which two men or two women may also be committed to each other. They ought to be recognized to have the corresponding rights of support, parenting, adopting, inheriting, divorcing, and the other privileges and obligations that spouses in a marriage expect.

We recognize that a remarkable shift in public opinion has occurred in the last thirty years or so in the aftermath of the so-called sexual revolution. Several European countries, including traditionally Catholic societies such as Spain, as well as a number of American states have either passed legislation to allow same-sex marriage, or have had their courts rule that restricting marriage to heterosexuals is unjust. It is not at all surprising that many Christians who live in areas where these social developments have progressed furthest should

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attempt to harmonize the attitudes and practice of their churches with those principles of fairness, tolerance, and compassion that are the supporting moral features of the acceptance of same-sex marriage.

If we were assessing simply the drift of European and North American societies, and the Anglican churches there, the picture would be discouraging for conservatives because of the apparent strength of liberalism. However, we remind ourselves that the Anglican Communion as a whole is much more solidly biblical and traditional than the Western liberal portion of it, and that the opposition we express in this paper to same-sex marriage is in fact the dominant position of worldwide Anglicanism. Further, we take courage from reflecting on the fact that a slide into lax sexual morals (characteristic of the last fifty years in the West) may be reversible, just as England witnessed a reversal of libertine views of sexual behavior in the seventeenth and again in the nineteenth centuries.

In recent years, the Anglican Communion has struggled with the issue of homosexuality in different contexts, including the Lambeth Conferences (at least since 1988), meetings of the Anglican Consultative Council, and Primates' Meetings. The growing acceptance of homosexuality in the Western sections of the Communion created a context in North America in which the consecration in 2003 of Gene Robinson as the Bishop of New Hampshire in the U.S.A. and the decision by the Diocese of New Westminster in Canada to bless same-sex unions seemed legitimate developments. But much of the rest of the Communion has not shared the conviction of the need to accept same-sex blessing or marriage. The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada find themselves torn between a sizeable liberal body in favor of accepting a revised view of sex and marriage, and large swaths of the Anglican Communion solidly opposed.¹

Ecumenical relations between Anglicans and other denominations are a very mixed bag. Some national churches in Europe (such as the Swedish Lutherans) have predictably reflected the prevailing acceptance of modern secular views on sexuality and marriage, and have opted for a "gender-neutral" definition of marriage for church weddings. We note, however, that the recent steps taken by the

¹ It is very likely that if Canada and the U.S.A. had not acted first, then certain similar events in Great Britain, Australia, or New Zealand, for example, would have sparked the debate and crisis.

Church of Sweden have received some rebuke by the leadership of the Church of England.²

Until recently, only a few churches in the United States, mainly weaker and shrinking groups such as the Unitarians and United Church of Christ, had taken the more liberal path on same-sex marriage. By the end of the summer of 2009, however, the scene changed considerably with the passage by a two-thirds majority of voters at the August 2009 meeting of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America of a resolution allowing Lutheran clergy living in same-sex relationships to be ordained and minister in that denomination. It has to be admitted that this development among the Lutherans, with whom the Episcopal Church has close ties, strengthens, *prima facie*, the credibility of the liberal direction in the Episcopal Church.

On the other hand, it is very clear that other church bodies with which we have nurtured special links because of a common understanding of theology, sacraments, and ordination, namely the Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, are distancing themselves from the Anglican Communion on this issue. There is also a vast range of evangelical and Pentecostal churches that differs sharply from the liberal direction in the Episcopal Church. Although Presbyterians and Methodists have also been moving in a liberal direction, it is not at all clear whether they will be following the example of the Episcopal Church (and alienating their conservative and evangelical constituencies, which tend to be larger than ours), or perhaps becoming more cautious about accepting same-sex marriage.

A major problem for liberals in the West has been the negative response to the American and Canadian innovations on homosexuality from Anglicans in the global South. Churches like the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada have long considered themselves sensitive and responsive to issues of racism, injustice, and poverty. They have taken pains over the years to operate as partners in mission with African, Asian, and Latin American churches, working

² See the letter of 26 June 2009 to the Archbishop of the Church of Sweden from the Council for Christian Unity, The Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Church of England Archbishops' Council, pointing out that the steps taken by the Swedish Church appear to be "a fundamental re-definition of the Christian doctrine of marriage and of basic Christian anthropology." The document may be found at <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/ccu/europe/notices/replytoabsweedn.pdf>. The recent approval of clergy with same-sex partners by the ELCA leaves the Church of Sweden less isolated.

for development, education, and peace in so many troubled spots in the world.³ Some liberals appear to have been deeply wounded because those in the global South who also believe in justice and peace have not been willing to accept North American positions on sexuality. In fact, well before the Lambeth Conference in 1998 (at which the vast majority of bishops of the Communion voted in the now-famous Lambeth I.10⁴), there was a restatement of the traditional Christian position on sexuality which both saddened and angered many liberals. This was the Second Anglican Encounter in the South, meeting in Kuala Lumpur, which warned that the adoption of liberal policies on blessing same-sex unions and ordaining practicing homosexual persons would be inconsistent with Scripture and would have damaging consequences for relationships within the Communion.⁵

It should not have been surprising, therefore, that the non-Western response to the announcement by the Diocese of New Westminster that they would go ahead with plans to bless same-sex unions, and to the election, ratification, and consecration of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire, has been widely negative. Various provinces of the Communion have attempted to express their displeasure with the North American churches in differing ways. Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda, for example, have attempted to cut all ties with the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada.⁶ Some have declared themselves “out of communion” or in a state of

³ Whether the perception of North American Anglicans has matched the reality on the ground is controverted. Willis Jenkins, for example, has argued that one of the reasons that non-Western Anglicans have responded so negatively to Western Anglican innovations is that Episcopalians in the U.S., especially “liberals/progressives,” have retreated from “international companionship.” See “Episcopalians, Homosexuality, and World Mission,” *Anglican Theological Review* 86, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 293–316.

⁴ The Anglican Communion maintains an archive of all Lambeth Conference resolutions. For Lambeth I.10 see <http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1998/1998-1-10.cfm>; accessed April 21, 2009.

⁵ For the “Second Trumpet from 2nd Anglican Encounter in the South, Kuala Lumpur 10–15 February 1997,” see http://www.globalsouthanglican.org/index.php/weblog/comments/secondtrumpetfrom2ndanglicanencounterin_the_southkualalumpur_10_15/; accessed November 19, 2009.

⁶ We say “attempted” because relationships between provinces of the Communion exist on many levels. A primate or even a house of bishops in one province may declare that their church is no longer in relationship with another church; it does not necessarily follow that all relationships cease. Ties may continue to exist between dioceses, between theological institutions, between members of international commissions, and between individuals.

“impaired communion” with the North American churches, without spelling out the exact implications of what these terms mean. Some have refused to accept money that is tied to the American and Canadian church bodies, or have refused to accept missionaries from them. Primates from some Anglican churches have refused to participate in eucharistic fellowship with primates from Canada and the U.S.A. at Primates’ Meetings; and some provinces, of course, boycotted the Lambeth Conference in 2008. Other churches (Southeast Asia, the West Indies, and the Sudan, for example) have attempted to express their opposition to the North American churches by calling for repentance but stopping short of declaring that they are out of communion with the wayward churches in Canada and the U.S.A.

All of these efforts to express displeasure, to declare that communion has indeed been broken, impaired, or endangered, are, as far as Anglicans in the non-Western world are concerned, attempts to say that it is the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada that have endangered communion by their actions. Most of the declarations by non-Western bishops and synods announcing impaired or broken communion explicitly lay blame for the schism at the feet of the North American churches. The more moderate Diocese of Egypt said of the North American provinces that “by their actions, they have chosen to step out of communion with the Anglican Communion.” The (then) Archbishop of Central Africa wrote, “You have broken our fellowship. To sit with you and meet with you would be a lie.”⁷ They believe that their responses are not acts of schism, but attempts to come to grips with the fact that the North American churches are the ones who have broken communion. Many Anglican Christians in the global South believe that to proceed in fellowship as if nothing had happened would be dishonest, damaging to their Christian witness in their own countries, and harmful to conservative Anglican Christian witness in the West.

The suggestion by some that American conservatives primarily prompt the non-Western reaction is condescending, implying that Anglicans in the southern hemisphere have been manipulated and

⁷ A listing of some of the statements issued after Robinson’s consecration by Anglican leaders from around the world can be found in Chris Sugden’s paper given to the Lambeth Commission entitled, “What is the Anglican Communion For?” at note 19. The paper can be found at: http://www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/process/lc_commission/docs/200402whatisitfor.pdf.

lack independent thought.⁸ Numerous factors are involved in the varying degrees of fracture between the North American churches and these non-Western churches.⁹ Non-Western Anglicans have mentioned several issues at stake. One is that the new positions of the American churches violate traditional modes of Anglican discernment. In addition, it seems clear to most African, Asian, and Latin American Anglicans that Scripture does not support the new positions. Tradition obviously does not align with this innovation, and most non-Western observers have a hard time seeing how reason, either, would support homosexual practice. Add to this that all four of the Anglican “Instruments of Unity” or “Instruments of Communion” have affirmed the requested moratoria, and most non-Western Anglicans are left convinced that the liberal argument is without merit.

Before July 2009, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the central leadership of the Church of England were loath to be too critical of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada, in the interests of maintaining the bonds of communion. But with the resolutions taken at the General Convention and the evident determination of the leadership of the Episcopal Church not even to agree to a delay in their agenda, the reality of the walking apart from the rest of the Communion by the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada became too clear to deny. Archbishop Rowan Williams pointed out the question at issue:

⁸ Miranda K. Hassett (no conservative herself) has made a careful and judicious study of the relationship between some American conservatives and their African counterparts in the midst of this controversy. See *Anglican Communion in Crisis: How Episcopal Dissidents and Their African Allies Are Reshaping Anglicanism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁹ Many observers highlight the rift between the North American churches and the African churches. Although there is an element of truth to this way of describing the situation, it is not so clear-cut. Not all African churches have declared broken communion as clearly as have Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, and Nigeria. The Primates of West Africa and Tanzania were both present at GAFCON, and have expressed displeasure, but have not spelled out the implications as strongly. The Indian Ocean, Burundi, the Sudan, and the Congo seem to have more hope that the Anglican Covenant proposed by the Windsor Report and now in its third draft may heal divisions. On the other hand, the Southern Cone (a Province in South America) seems closer to Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, and Nigeria in its response. Asian provinces have expressed a variety of (mostly negative) reactions, but have yet to declare communion to be broken. It would be a mistake to lay the blame on “Africa” as many have done—the vast majority of the global South provinces oppose North American innovations. Most non-Western Anglicans agree with the Windsor Report that the Anglican Communion has been damaged by North American actions.

It is about whether the Church is free to recognise same-sex unions by means of public blessings that are seen as being, at the very least, analogous to Christian marriage. In the light of the way in which the Church has consistently read the Bible for the last two thousand years, it is clear that a positive answer to this question would have to be based on the most painstaking biblical exegesis and on a wide acceptance of the results within the Communion, with due account taken of the teachings of ecumenical partners also. A major change naturally needs a strong level of consensus and solid theological grounding. This is not our situation in the Communion. Thus a blessing for a same-sex union cannot have the authority of the Church Catholic, or even of the Communion as a whole.¹⁰

Further, the influential Bishop of Durham, N. T. Wright, who has also hitherto taken pains to attempt a balanced view of controversial statements and developments in the interests of preserving the integrity of the Communion, has pointed to the need to accept the reality of the divergent paths within the Anglican Communion indicated by Rowan Williams's reflections:

The resolutions that were passed [at the Episcopal Church's General Convention, 2009] clearly had the effect (a) of reminding people that the way was in fact open all along to the episcopal appointment of non-celibate homosexuals, and (b) of reminding people that rites for public same-sex blessings could indeed be developed. The Archbishop of Canterbury is now clearly if tacitly saying, throughout the document, that there is no reasonable likelihood, at any point in many years to come, that the Episcopal Church will in fact turn round and embrace the *moratoria ex animo*, still less the theology that underlies the Communion's constant and often-repeated stance on sexual behaviour. Nor is there any reasonable likelihood that the Episcopal Church will in fact be able to embrace the Covenant when it attains its final form a few months from now. The Reflections deal with that reality.¹¹ [Text at website given: "That is the reality with which the Reflections deal."]

¹⁰ See "Communion, Covenant, and our Anglican Future," at <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2502>; accessed August 18, 2009.

¹¹ Available at <http://www.anglicancommunioninstitute.com/2009/07>; accessed August 18, 2009.

A divide has now developed between the Western, largely liberal Anglican provinces (with important conservative sections) of the Communion and the more traditional, non-Western global South. The acceptance of same-sex marriage is merely one of the issues revealing the divide. There are exceptions. Desmond Tutu, a high profile, non-Western Anglican supports gay rights for the same reason that he worked for the rights of blacks in South Africa and for an end to apartheid. From this perspective it seems that homosexuals are an oppressed group in need of liberation from prejudice and oppression, and so he would argue (from Exodus and other biblical texts) that Christians ought to side with those seeking equal rights for homosexual persons.

The liberation argument can cut more than one way, however. Numerous church leaders, especially in Africa, see the move to approve homosexual marriage as in itself just one more example of Western imperialism. The non-Western world has long had to live with economic, political, and social agendas being set by rich and powerful “developed” nations. U.S. foreign aid, for example, has often come with military and political strings attached. The current dispute looks to them uncomfortably like an ecclesiastical form of cultural imposition. Many in the global South see the story which governs the church in North America not as the biblical narrative, but as a modernist story. Just as the World Bank has been able to define what economic systems should look like in order to supply loans and aid, so the developed Christian world thinks it is in a position to define the nature of progress and well-being for other societies, and to force the acceptance of that understanding on the rest of the world. So, rather than the Anglican ideal being measured by the attractive-sounding ideals of “mutual responsibility and interdependence in the body of Christ,”¹² the churches of the West act as if they are better able to discern God’s will than their sisters and brothers in the rest of the Communion. When Western church leaders claim that their stand is “prophetic,” or that the Spirit is leading them into this new understanding, the church leaders of the global South immediately ask the epistemological question: “How do you know this? On what basis can you claim to have been given this new revelation? Is it not your wealth

¹² See E. R. Fairweather, ed., *Anglican Congress 1963: Report of Proceedings* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1963).

and power (and the habits and assumptions which naturally accompany them) that enable you to press this argument?”

Conservatives in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada feel a certain dismay at this point in the development of the issues and the crisis in the church. In spite of the lack of clarity on the issue of same-sex attraction on the part of biological and social scientists, and in spite of the wounds in much of the rest of the Anglican Communion, and in spite of the clear opposition of Scripture, our leadership is confident enough of its understanding of the issue to refuse even a modest delay before proceeding in the same way that secular society is going.

We realize that many leaders of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada see this as a kind of litmus test of moral sensitivity and courage. Slavery was such an issue in the early nineteenth century in the England of Wilberforce, and remained an issue much longer for leaders in the United States. And there have been social and reform movements, such as women’s rights, the rights of workers to safety and minimum wages, not to mention the civil rights movement of the 1960s, when many in the Episcopal Church were socially conservative, protective of the prerogatives of the establishment and of men in power. Many hesitated to join a movement that seemed to have unwelcome social and political features, and where it seemed easier and more “prudent” to wait.

We believe that there were a number of Episcopal bishops in 2009 who may well have had some conservative reservations about moving ahead with same-sex marriage, and are sensitive to the considerations listed above; and yet they lend their support to revision, perhaps because they are afraid of being like the two Episcopal bishops in Alabama in 1963 who joined with six other local churchmen in writing an open letter to Martin Luther King, Jr., criticizing him for disobeying established laws and for not having patience to wait for change in civil rights to develop gradually and naturally.¹³ We believe that many of our leaders would have done well to be more hesitant on moving forward on the issue of same-sex marriage, however. At the heart of our position is the conviction that the issue of same-sex marriage simply cannot be put in the same category as other social issues

¹³ Of course it was King’s famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” that pointed out that some laws are unjust of their very nature and need to be changed rather than being put up with indefinitely.

on which Anglicans and Christians in general have changed their mind. We do not believe that acceptance of gay and lesbian marriage fits neatly into some narrative of successive liberation movements that emancipated serfs, slaves, child laborers, blacks, and now homosexual couples.

When we consider some of the moral issues on which the church (speaking broadly) has changed its thinking and practices over the centuries, what emerges is not so much a general pattern as the more difficult requirement to consider the rationale for change in an issue-by-issue fashion, and not on the basis of some template of “progress.” Such issues as slavery, capital punishment, usury, divorce, just war, the role of women in society, and (more particularly) the ordination of women to office in the church, as well as others, need to be analyzed and thought through on both biblical and philosophical lines. This takes some careful work, as each issue has its own rationale, pattern of biblical material and its interpretation, and its own distinctive relationship to science and philosophy. When this is done, the case for same-sex marriage does not have the same kind of biblical support and philosophical rationale that women’s ordination and a moderate divorce policy have, for example.¹⁴ Conservative Anglicans in modern Western countries are well placed to participate in this Communion-wide analysis and discussion, since they have a stake in both camps, and might be able to function, if not as a bridge that unites, then as a kind of interpreter of each side to the other. They have usually been trained at the same seminaries and fostered by the same modern cultures as the more liberal leaders in America and Europe. They understand the pressures and logic behind this development and can to some extent agree and sympathize with it: fairness, compassion, and individual rights are strong moral principles, and compelling forces for change. However, conservatives also share the skepticism voiced

¹⁴ The very fact that some prominent denominations such as the Southern Baptists have in recent years shifted from the acceptance of women clergy to opposing them shows that the overall biblical teaching is ambiguous and can support both sides. On divorce, Roman Catholic experts argue that there are good arguments for modifying the view of divorce along the lines of changes in human rights and economic policy; see John T. Noonan, *A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 161–190. For a general approach and explication of the details of exegesis which underlie a position like ours which accepts women’s ordination and some use of divorce but does not accept same-sex marriage, see Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperCollins, 1996), esp. chapters 1, 15, and 16.

by non-Western church leaders about the agenda of modern liberals, because so often the attitudes toward a revision of traditional views of sex and marriage are linked with liberal views of biblical authority, theological heterodoxy, and a general tendency to water down the basis and nature of Christian attitudes and way of life. This would generate a Christianity that, by not being countercultural enough, becomes unfaithful to the gospel.

We offer a reflection on tradition. In one sense, the force behind tradition favors current practice, and is against change that is arbitrary or without good reason. In another sense, however, tradition should not have very much force at all if we are considering the case of an institution—including the church!—seeking to rectify a mistake in its understanding. The prohibition of usury, for example, was held for centuries, and came to be seriously questioned both on the adequacy of the interpretation of the few scriptural texts that were thought relevant, and of the philosophical understanding provided by Aristotle on the nature of money. In that case, the evidence to decide the issue comes from reason and Scripture, and not from tradition. In other words, the challenge to change the canon law on usury could not be answered simply by appealing to the many centuries when the prohibition was accepted. Galileo and Darwin could not be answered by appealing to how long the opinions on a geocentric universe or a recent creation were held—if there is genuine error involved, then of course it is time for the traditional view to give way.

The basis for conservative resistance to the liberal agenda, then, cannot simply be an appeal to the longstanding tradition of opposition, but must use a strong combination of reason and Scripture. We apply the framework that Richard Hooker brought to bear on contentious items during the Reformation and its aftermath in England. Where the more radical (Puritan) reformers alleged that policies and officials of the church and liturgical practices required scriptural warrant, Hooker articulated a valuable Anglican approach. Where practices and institutions develop in accordance with reason and tradition, and when they *are not in contradiction with Holy Scripture*, then there is no requirement to abolish such understandings and practices (such as church vestments, hierarchical ministry, and so on). While it may be possible on grounds of justice (in a modern sense) to argue in favor of same-sex relations, it would be in contradiction to the teaching of Scripture, and it would be in contradiction to the guidance from reason which Hooker articulated in his understanding of natural law. Though tradition and reason carry weight, they are, finally, not on the

same level as Scripture, which must be deemed the decisive factor. In the following sections of this document we will set forth our position and articulate its basis in Scripture and in relation to scientific knowledge and the philosophical approach of natural law.

Part 2

The Witness of Scripture

Anglican conservatives are distinguished by treating the Bible as uniquely authoritative for basic Christian belief and practice. Our strong reluctance to set aside what we consider Scripture's direct meaning may well be the single most important factor in the opposition of Anglican conservatives to the acceptance of same-sex marriage.

We are aware that strong appeal to scriptural authority invites the charge of fundamentalism, but as we make clear in what follows, we accept critical principles in textual interpretation. The accusation of "fundamentalism" all too often becomes a rhetorical term to dismiss traditionalist arguments, just as "homophobic" is often used to silence or even demonize those who do not agree with same-sex marriage and the concerns of the gay and lesbian community.

Interpreting the Bible: Ancient Text and Contemporary Message

Interpreting the Bible involves reading an ancient text in a contemporary context, establishing a dialogue between very different cultures and life situations. Awareness of both ancient and modern situations and properly balancing them enables the biblical message to be clearly understood and applied.

Premodern interpreters might seem naïve to us, but they took the canonical text to be answering questions that arose in their own context and were not concerned with the questions of different cultural situations. The same phenomenon occurs in Western art of the Middle Ages or Renaissance: in a scene of the annunciation, nativity, or crucifixion of Christ, for example, the landscape, architecture, and clothing are taken from the milieu of the artist, not from what they thought the scenes and figures would have *really* looked like in first-century Palestine. In fact, it would not have occurred to the artists or their public that "historical accuracy" was part of the task of artistic description of a past event.

The premodern reading of Scripture often searched for symbols, hidden meanings, and allegorical interpretations, such as reading the Song of Songs as a poetic description of Christ and his love for the church. Premodern interpreters thus discovered inspiration and sometimes deep theological insight, although we might say that they sometimes imposed their own concerns onto the text, assuming continuities that did not always exist, and even missing some meanings and emphases in the text that did not fit their own framework.

Modern biblical interpretation developed with the scientific approach of the Enlightenment; it tried to avoid the assimilation of the two contexts, the ancient text and contemporary life. Its aim was an “objective” interpretation that understood the text in its own right, and developed the resources to accomplish this: linguistic studies, archaeology and history, comparative religion, and so on. The exegetical task was primary. After exegesis, the interpreter (such as the preacher with a homiletic task) might go on to reflect on possibilities of contemporary application, but it was understood that the “real meaning” of the text stemmed from the objective, exegetical work, and not from subjective interpretation.

Although ideally this modern type of interpretation would better respect the text itself, it all too easily deceived itself about its capacity to distance itself from its own concerns and agenda. Just as premodern interpretation did, so modern historical criticism also looked for answers to its own questions, namely, those concerning the text’s historical origins. Then it simply assumed that providing such information (for example, that a certain passage in Exodus comes from a P source rather than J or E) was of primary importance in discerning the text’s significance for us. Such historical exegesis tended to produce tedious commentaries that often lacked theological insight. However, could we have the advantages of premodern interpretation (theological coherence and spiritual richness) and of modern interpretation (historical accuracy) without their respective disadvantages?

Two endeavors are involved in biblical interpretation. First, we are trying to achieve an objective understanding of this text according to its own presuppositions and concerns. There is an analogy here in the process of gaining an objective understanding of other persons whom we love. Because of our commitment to them as persons, we want to know them in reality, and not just make them a projection of our own interests. We commit ourselves to understanding them in

their distinctiveness, even where we may find them difficult or objectionable. Often we find that when we do that, what seemed objectionable becomes, if not likable, at least understandable. We may then be able to learn from who they are—which does not happen either if we reject them, or if we assimilate them too quickly to what we understand and accept. The significance of modern biblical criticism lies here. It declined to be bound by traditions concerning the meaning of texts and insisted on seeking to discover their inherent meaning. Exegesis focuses on the meaning of texts as acts of communication, and in interpretation, one sets aside the significance of the text for the interpreter in order to do justice to its inherent meaning. This reflects the ethical principle that someone wished to communicate something here, and we respectfully seek to understand it.

There is also another endeavor involved in interpretation, another way of understanding what is taking place. There was some reason for our interest in this text (or this person): something drew our attention to it, and persuaded us that it was worth the effort to understand. Moreover, being drawn in is the way into understanding the text (or the person). The subjective becomes the way into the objective. It turns out to be both an unavoidable hindrance to interpretation and its indispensable help. The challenge to interpretation is to maximize this help and limit the hindrance.

One aid to our reading of the Bible is the recognition that it has been given to the whole church and not merely to individuals. We read the Bible with other eyes, and not just our own. If we are fortunate, we read it in a heterogeneous congregation. But we also read it in the company (which we intentionally bring in) of other eras (such as the fathers or the reformers); of other faith communities (such as Judaism); and of other cultures and contexts (such as liberation theology from South America, and inculturation theology from Asia or Africa). These can enable us to see things we would not otherwise see, and to recognize previous misperceptions.

The insights of recent feminist interpretation illustrate these dynamics. The premodern interpreters (and with some significant overlap into the twentieth century) read Genesis 1 and 2 in light of the patriarchal realities of their own cultures. The creation of Eve as a “helper” for Adam does not imply subordination to Adam, but that is how the passage came to be read, uncritically we may say, and we have benefited from feminist critics pointing out such hidden cultural assumptions.

Can the challenge of taking a fresh look at our assumptions also be applied to the issue of same-sex relationships? There is, for example, the long association of “sodomy” and homosexuality with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:4–11); but the point of the story may well be to illustrate the violence and wickedness of the city in general, and not to highlight a lurid view of homosexual relationships.¹⁵

Advocates of same-sex relationships sometimes point to the relationships of Naomi and Ruth, and of David and Jonathan, as possible biblical examples of consensual sexual relationships between members of the same sex. Here there is the obvious difficulty of arguing from an agenda rather than from explicit textual support. But it also exposes the weakness of modern Western culture in not being able to foster or even understand deeply committed same-sex friendships that do not involve physical sexual expression.

Liberals often follow feminists in pointing to the social and religious assumptions built into biblical law. Feminists criticize patriarchal scriptural attitudes where laws dealing with sexual behavior often have different standards for men and women, and express a pattern of treating women as property rather than as full persons. Similarly, some scholars have argued that the Levitical condemnation of homosexual acts has more to do with purity laws (such as the rules governing dead bodies), or with idolatry (where sleeping with male prostitutes was connected with pagan worship).¹⁶ The conclusion is drawn that the force of the prohibitions of same-sex relationships in the Old Testament comes from the concern for ritual purity in an Israelite legal context that are not binding after Christ’s coming and so do not have the force of universal moral prohibitions.

This “tour de force” style of exegesis has been used by liberals to limit the scope and relevance of all the biblical passages dealing with same-sex relationships. If the prohibitions in Mosaic Law are simply on the same level as dietary and other ceremonial laws, the New Testament passages can be severely curtailed by other means. In the few

¹⁵ Conservatives have different opinions in interpreting this Genesis passage. Robert Gagnon in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2001), 71–91, defends the traditional interpretation, while Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 381, writes that “there is nothing in the passage pertinent to a judgment about the morality of consensual homosexual intercourse.”

¹⁶ See L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, second edition (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2007).

passages where male homosexuals are mentioned (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10), it can be argued that the Hellenistic context countenanced adolescent youths offering their thighs to adult men, and that the real concern was with pederasty and exploitative sex. The clearest and strongest passage, Romans 1:26–27, has been cleverly dealt with by limiting its reference only to those individuals, whether heterosexual or homosexual, who act against their natural instincts and (perversely) engage in erotic activity with those to whom they are not naturally attracted. In other words, homosexuals who have an inherent same-sex orientation, it is argued, are not in view in this passage, because they act in accordance with their nature.

Taking the passages individually, there is some plausibility in the critical reinterpretation (except, we would say, in the case of Romans 1 where the liberal case is specious). A coherent understanding emerges from setting these passages in interrelationship, not least because sometimes they are alluding to one another. Further, setting these various passages in the context of a broader theological framework has the effect of reinforcing the traditional interpretation of the texts. Specifically, Scripture sets proper sexual expression within God's designing a lifelong exclusive heterosexual relationship as the proper context for bringing up children.

A full-blown "postmodern" approach, which has been a contemporary reaction against the misplaced confidence of the modern historical critic to be able to grasp the true meaning of a text, tends to give up on the very idea of getting to the real meaning of a text. This, however, is to throw out the baby with the bath water. There is a certain ethical obligation in interpretation: we owe it to the author to try to understand what he or she meant; we also owe it to our forebears in the faith communities who took these writings into their Scriptures and invited us to live by them; and we also owe it to ourselves and to the consistency principle. If there is no meaning in the Sodom and Gomorrah story (a very different thing from saying that we may have been mistaken in understanding it), then there can be no objection to its being understood as a critique of all same-sex relationships and thus used as a kind of club with which to beat people in same-sex relationships. The fact that sometimes we may be uncertain what Isaiah or Paul was seeking to communicate is no reason for abandoning the attempt to understand what they wrote. Our culture, time, and place does enter into the process of interpretation; but that does not

prevent us from trying to understand a text (and a person) different from us, one that needs understanding on its own terms.

Using the Bible as a Whole

An important aspect of tradition is that the form of the Scriptures has been determined and handed down by the church as the Word of God. It is not so much that the church councils *decided* or *conferred* authority on certain gospel narratives and epistles of Paul, etc., but that the church has *recognized* that these texts inherently have special authority.

We discern the wisdom (and the guidance of the Holy Spirit) in the pluriformity of the narratives, even where there are overlapping accounts, differing accounts, slight differences in the presentation, and diversity of emphasis. Deuteronomy, for instance, covers some of the same material of the law and covenant as earlier sections of the Torah, but with a different context and purpose. In the New Testament, the four gospels have much material in common, but also different themes and emphases, as well as individual unique material.

To minimize the problems of proof-texting and to secure the most faithful interpretation, we must be attentive to the witness of the whole of Scripture. We are not merely assembling the full range of relevant texts on a topic. We are treating them in a way that is consistent with what we know of the basic theological themes and principles, and especially in accordance with the teaching and witness of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God.

Jesus and the Torah

In Matthew 5, Jesus makes a series of declarations beginning “You have heard . . . but I say to you.” These declarations take up statements in the Torah and comment on the way it was or might be interpreted, or on how its requirements need to be taken further. In criticizing anger as well as murder, lust as well as adultery, Jesus does not tell his disciples that they may now ignore the commandments, but refers to attitudes that may motivate behavior. Matthew 5:43 is more puzzling, as there is, of course, no suggestion in the Torah that people should hate their enemies.

There is some irony about the fact that these declarations in Matthew 5 appear in a chapter that contains strong statements about the abiding significance of the Torah. Jesus declares that he has come not

to annul the Torah and the Prophets but to bring them to fulfillment; people who attempt to revoke any of them or teach other people to do so have a very low place in the kingdom of heaven, while those who observe and teach them have a high place (Matt. 5:17–19). This fits with other aspects of the way Jesus refers to the Torah, such as his repeated affirmations “it is written” during his testing in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1–11). Jesus takes the same attitude to the Jewish Scriptures as any other Jew.

How does “fulfillment” of the Torah come about through those pronouncements that involve declaring, “You have heard . . . but I say to you”? In some instances, this fulfillment is through the interpretation of an individual requirement of the Torah. Leviticus itself makes clear that the requirement to love one’s neighbor implies loving one’s enemy. If the average Israelite has enemies, they will also be neighbors, that is, people in the village. Those who steal or harm one’s animals, accuse one of wrongdoing, or seduce one’s daughters will be one’s enemies. Thus, in Leviticus 19:18 the command about loving one’s neighbor follows an exhortation about not taking redress or bearing grudges against people, and it suggests the principle involved in these acts of self-denial. Taken in isolation, loving one’s neighbor could mean that one is free to dismiss or attack one’s enemy; but Jesus makes explicit what is implicit in the Torah by declaring that it implies having concern for and a forgiving attitude toward one’s enemies in the community. He thus fulfills or “fills out” the Torah.

In some comments on Torah passages, Jesus declares that the requirements of the Law are more demanding than conventional interpretation suggests. For example, in Mark 10:2–9 when some Pharisees want to know his attitude to divorce, he asks them what the Torah says. They refer to Deuteronomy 24, which requires a man to provide a woman with papers to indicate her status if he divorces her. Jesus responds by declaring, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’” When the disciples press him on the matter, he declares that anyone who divorces his wife (unless it is because of *porneia*, Matthew 19:9 adds) and marries another commits adultery.¹⁷ Jesus thus sets verses from Genesis 1 and 2 alongside the verses from

¹⁷ See also Matthew 5:32.

Deuteronomy, draws attention to the clash between them, provides a principle for understanding the clash, and suggests how a disciple should behave in this connection (though in Matthew 19 he recognizes that not everyone will be able to live with his teaching on the question).

Jesus thus suggests a basis for interpreting Scripture: we are to evaluate scriptural perspectives according to the way they reflect God's vision in creation, along with the possible provision for human hardness of heart. It is possible to see the same critical principle implicit in his exhortations concerning anger, lust, lying, and revenge. Banning murder, adultery, false oaths, and excessive retribution does not go far enough, because it falls short of the standards implicit in creation. Indeed, one might then see Jesus' entire teaching as expounding what it means to be a real human being who lives according to the vision of the Creator, as he makes explicit in his comment reported by the evangelist on loving enemies (Matt. 5:45). The Torah does not begin with the concrete commands in Exodus to Deuteronomy that make allowance for human willfulness. It begins with the vision in Genesis 1–2, and Jesus fulfills the Torah partly by reaffirming its vision, indicating its implications, and challenging his disciples to live by this vision. Jesus clarifies the interpretation of the implications of the Torah.

According to the evangelists, Jesus' interpretive principle is to reflect the Torah's inner meaning and purpose. His comments on aspects of the Torah that allow for hardness of heart do not imply that he is decanonizing or relativizing sections of the Law. For example, in Mark 10:2–9 Jesus refers to Deuteronomy 24:1–4 in relation to the reality of human stubbornness. Regarding same-sex relationships, the question might arise whether in our present context Jesus might say either "You have heard . . . but I say to you," or, "Moses because of your hardness of heart," and if so, what he would mean by these statements. Is same-sex attraction a divine gift from creation parallel to heterosexual attraction, or is it a manifestation of sinfulness? In isolation, the restrictive regulations in Leviticus and the negative comments in the epistles about same-sex acts might be read either way.

Might same-sex relationships reflect God's creation intent and have the same theological and ethical status as heterosexual relationships? This would fit with the fact that such relationships seem as "natural" to some people as heterosexual relationships seem to other

people, yet it can hardly be reckoned to fit with the Torah's own vision of creation and of what is "natural" in the way that is the case with a renouncing of anger, lust, oaths, and revenge. Jesus points out that the opening chapters of the Torah describe God making humanity male and female and describe a man leaving his parents to be joined to a woman. It is hard to see how this could fit with the idea that a same-sex marriage is just as valid a creation reality as heterosexual marriage.

The argument is often made that the scriptural treatment of chattel slavery, the subordination of women, and the prohibition of usury are moral issues where subsequent reflection and experience led to genuine change in the church's teaching, and that the question of same-sex relationships poses the same kind of challenge to accept the wisdom of a new perspective. However, this comparison really does not work. With regard to the subordination of women, it is explicit in Genesis 3 that men's ruling over women came about as a result of human disobedience rather than as an original intention of creation. Texts that require the subordination of women can therefore plausibly be seen as concessions to human sinfulness, and reflect the disorder of humanity after the fall.

The same description in Genesis 1:27 of humanity made in God's image in turn leads to a description of humanity's vocation to cultivate and tend the garden; there is no hint of slavery or servitude in human relationships. Texts in the Torah that later regularize servitude constrain an institution that exists because of the fallenness of humankind. The New Testament has been seen as more acquiescent to slavery, but there are texts (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:10) that put human trafficking in a negative light. We should regard the apparent acquiescence (not at all the same as approval, by the way!) as largely a reflection of the immense power and apparent resistance to change of the political and legal institutions of the Roman empire within which the church had to manage.

There are no indications in Scripture parallel to the principles used against slavery and the subordination of women to which we could appeal to demonstrate that God's creation ideal should also embrace same-sex relationships. Rather, the portrayal of human origins in Genesis points in the opposite direction. There, the centerpiece in the vision of human marriage is not intimacy or relationship or romance but family. The man and the woman will be the means and the context in which the family will grow in such a way as to serve God and the land. This point in itself does not exclude same-sex marriages, but it does suggest they are not an equally valid option.

If the church—or at least a large portion of it in Western countries—does actually move ahead on the question of accepting same-sex relationships, it may appear to be following a pattern of moral change demonstrated in the past. In our judgment, however, the reasoning behind this change in viewing marriage and sexual relations will have come more from assimilation to modern culture than from following Jesus in learning how better to understand and live by the Scriptures.

Canonical Interpretation

Another way to describe critical interpretation is to think in terms of a canon within the canon. Though this is an ambiguous notion, it may function in several ways. It can designate parts of Scripture that a particular group takes with ultimate seriousness, a kind of practical canon within the formal canon. The informal and possibly unconscious selection of preferred texts can be an entrance key to Scripture, but needs to be open to revision. Second, the idea can denote material within the canon that one views as actually true and binding, over against material that reflects human misconceptions and to which we are not bound. Third, the canon within the canon can denote material that expresses the most central or clearest insights, which provide clues to understanding other material without implying that this other material is less binding. This canonical priority reminds readers that the canon itself remains the actual canon. The greater attention paid to interpreting portions of the Bible in light of themes and concerns of the rest of the canon of Scripture has been spurred on in part by the work of such biblical scholars as Brevard Childs.¹⁸ Our concern is to take the whole of Scripture seriously. How do we do this in connection with same-sex relationships?

The attempt to discover what the Bible has to say about same-sex relationships involves looking to it for answers to questions it does not pose, at least not in the form we want to ask them. The notion of same-sex marriage did not exist in Scripture or in its contemporary contexts. To the church, the idea of the Scriptures being the canon implied that they offer enlightenment on issues other than ones they directly discuss. The discussions of various issues from within Scripture suggest frameworks and paradigms for considering others.

¹⁸ See Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1970). See also Richard Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, who stresses the importance of looking at the whole canonical witness of the Bible in using it to address moral issues.

The first chapters of Genesis were not written to describe the mechanics of the process whereby the world came into existence. It is a misuse of Scripture to force it into a scientific framework foreign to its outlook. On the other hand, we realize that “in Main Street America, evolution is often interpreted as a creation story for atheists.”¹⁹ Many people who believe in the theory of evolution do so because they believe that it excludes any need for God. Of course, many other people recognize that it does not do so. In that context, it is quite appropriate to read Genesis 1 as emphasizing the process whereby the world came into existence, for example, that God was involved, that it was systematic and organized, and that it issued in a good result. It is appropriate to put some emphasis on aspects of Genesis 1 that address our questions as well as those of people such as Judeans living in Babylon in the sixth century.

The practice of tithing and the observance of the Sabbath exemplify the ongoing process of interpretation of Scripture within the community. Through the Old Testament and at least into the gospels, there is never any question that these observances are expected of the people, but what they mean changes. Thus, tithing in Genesis 14 starts as a recognition of achievement and as such a common Middle Eastern practice, and a natural human instinct. In Jacob’s story (Gen. 28:22), tithing becomes a response to God’s promise, though perhaps one conveying some irony as it is a way of appearing generous. In Leviticus 27:30–33, it expresses an acknowledgment of God’s giving; people cannot claim credit for tithing and need to be aware of evading its demand. In Numbers 18:21–32, it is a means of supporting the ministry. In Deuteronomy 14:22–29, it also benefits the needy. In 1 Samuel 8:15–17, Samuel warns that tithes will be claimed by the king, suggesting more irony; demanding tithes is a means of oppression. In Amos 4:4, tithing is accompanied by self-indulgence, suggesting yet more irony: tithing as a means of evading real commitment (cf. Matt. 23:23). In Malachi 3:8–12, it becomes an index of whether people are really committed to God and therefore the decisive factor in whether they experience God’s blessing. It is no surprise that in many churches, this can seem to be the pastor’s favorite text. Yet it means that tithing is in danger of being merely a means of our paying for services rendered and for our church buildings to be kept ambient.

¹⁹ Karl W. Giberson and Donald A. Yerxa, *Species of Origins: America’s Search for a Creation Story* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 58.

Instead, we might ask a different sort of question. In light of the way God inspired the community to see so many different meanings in tithing within Scripture, perhaps Western Christians might tithe for the provision of nourishment, education, and basic health care in the poor sections of the world, and expect that perhaps to issue in God blessing us. This would radically confront (and perhaps imperil) the financial foundations of standard North American church life.

In a parallel way, the Old Testament always assumes that Israel must observe the Sabbath, but the significance of doing so keeps changing. In Exodus 20:8–11, it reflects the pattern of God's work as creator. In Deuteronomy 5:12–15, it reflects the pattern of God's deliverance of serfs from Egypt. In Amos 8:4–7, it confronts the desire of merchants to make money. In Isaiah 56:1–8, it provides eunuchs and foreigners with an identity marker for commitment to the God of Israel. In the modern West, we could see the Sabbath in tension with a mentality shaped by consumerism, efficiency, and constant activity, thus constituting a radical confrontation with the foundations of the culture.²⁰

Seeing the significance of Scripture for our world combines a kind of left-brain process with a right-brain process: one is linear and exegetical, undertaken as an attempted exercise in objective study, while the other is imaginative and intuitive, undertaken in light of current issues and experience. The two of course complement each other. Investigating the significance of tithing or the Sabbath within Scripture, utilizing critical and exegetical methods, is a predominantly left-brain process. Leaping from what is going on in the ancient text to insight for our own world is more a right-brain process that more obviously involves the Holy Spirit's inspiration if it is to generate genuine insight. Testing the alleged insight involves a further left-brain process utilizing critical and exegetical methods, analogous to the process for testing prophecy (of which, indeed, this is an example). One would have to ask whether the kind of giving for the sake of the poor in the third world as suggested above, with its possible consequence as neglecting church buildings and facilities in the West, fits with the teaching of Scripture as a whole. One would likewise have to ask whether encouraging people to work less fits with the teaching of Scripture as a whole.

²⁰ See Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1989), 90–99.

Can we then find a plausible canonical reading of the Scriptures in which a positive view of same-sex relationships has a place? We think this is highly dubious, and the next section provides a summary analysis of texts that demonstrate this. To speak of interpreting Scripture canonically involves some redundancy. By definition, Scripture is a canon, and the church's canon is Scripture. It is its key resource and final norm. The question seems to be whether our church is able to let Scripture function in that fashion in dealing with the issue of same-sex marriage, or whether the issue will be determined more by cultural and political pressures.

Summary of Biblical Teaching on Same-Sex Relationships

There is force and clarity from the texts of Scripture that we coordinate. Important texts underscore that marriage is between a man and a woman. Texts that forbid same-sex relationships should be read in this context.

Marriage Texts

In Genesis, we have familiar texts summarizing the place of man and woman in God's creation plan. Genesis 1:27, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

Here is an obvious emphasis on the image of God in all humanity. That God created humanity as male and female stresses that both genders constitute humanity and share in the reflection of the image. This much can be confidently stated. It is a more controversial and perhaps tenuous argument to link the definition of the image of God directly to the male-female relationship in the way that Karl Barth did when he identified the complementary relation between man and woman as constituting the *imago Dei*.²¹

It is fair to conclude from the context that the mention of male and female has to do with the fulfillment of God's purpose in creation. There is a link to dominion in verse 26 and then to the fruitfulness of humankind emphasized in verse 28—the blessing of humanity and its proliferation is implied in the creation of male and female. Anglican biblical scholar Gordon Wenham has commented: "Here then we

²¹ Barth was trying to stress that the individual does not possess the *imago Dei* as the quality of rationality, and so on, but as a person-in-community. See *Church Dogmatics* III/1, 183–206.

have a clear statement of the divine purpose of marriage: positively, it is for the procreation of children; negatively, it is a rejection of the ancient oriental fertility cults.”²²

Genesis 2:24 is explicitly about marriage: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” The phrase “clings to” or “cleaves to” suggests that marriage should be characterized by both passion and permanence.²³ Man and woman becoming “one flesh” has a multifaceted implication: the physical sexual union itself, the children conceived in marriage, the spiritual and emotional relationship that it involves, as well as the new set of kinship relations established by the marriage—all are indicated by the resultant “one flesh.” This perspective on the one-flesh aspect of marriage is the basis for the subsequent provisions in the Mosaic Law for kinship and remarriage.²⁴

In the New Testament, we have Mark 10:2–9 (parallel in Matthew 19) that reaffirms the principles of marriage according to God’s will. Jesus’ citation from Genesis includes both Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. This is an important reaffirmation of the continuing basis for marriage under the new covenant. Jesus’ concern centers on divorce, and we must take seriously (especially in the Markan version where there is no exception clause as found in Matthew) that divorce ought not to take place. “The marriage ethics of the kingdom of God must be based not on a concession to human failure, but on the only pattern set out in God’s original creation of man and woman.”²⁵

Although in concise format, we have some clear characteristics of marriage delineated in these verses from Genesis and Mark:

- Between male and female
- Connected to children and fruitfulness
- Passion and commitment (emotional and institutional weight)
- To be considered permanent.

How are we to consider same-sex relationships in light of these creation principles? From a strictly logical point of view, describing God’s

²² Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1987), 33.

²³ Wenham, *Genesis*, 71.

²⁴ Wenham, *Genesis*, 71.

²⁵ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 388.

intention as a man and a woman leaving their parents and cleaving to each other does not necessarily prevent a same-sex pair from fulfilling the last two characteristics here, namely passionate attachment and permanent commitment. The connection of marriage, in God's plan, to the fruitfulness of humanity through the creation of children and families, however, would imply an important lack of an essential characteristic.

Texts Forbidding Same-Sex Relations

There are only a few texts in Scripture about same-sex relations, but in the words of Richard Hays, these "are unambiguously and unremittently negative in their judgment":²⁶

1. *Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13*. The act of a man lying with another man "as with a woman" is categorically prohibited—note that the act in general is proscribed, and that it is not relevant to consider the motivations for the act (exploitation, prostitution, and so on).

Arguments that this is a purity law (where the concern is ritual purity rather than a fundamental moral principle), or that many aspects of the Old Testament are irrelevant in the new covenant after Jesus, are considerably undercut by Jesus' own affirmation of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 in Mark 10.

2. *Romans 1:18–32*. Here Paul is reflecting on the purpose of creation, and the tendency of human beings to turn toward creating their own objects of worship. Humanity's unrighteousness consists fundamentally in a refusal to honor God and render him thanks. The human race has neglected the evidence of God and turned to idolatry.²⁷

For Paul, one dramatic example of this reversal is the love of male for male and female for female. The reference to God as creator (v. 26) would automatically invoke in readers the creation account, especially Genesis 1:27 that links creation of humanity in the image of God with their creation as male and female.

We may observe the following: (1) Paul's overarching purpose in the early chapters of Romans is to argue for the universality of sin. The point is not to isolate homosexual practice as a special type of sin. (2) Paul points specifically to the form of the homosexual relationship,

²⁶ Hays, *Moral Vision*, 381.

²⁷ Hays, *Moral Vision*, 384.

its inversion of the created order, as a sign of this larger condition of fallen humanity. In so doing, he refers to lesbian couples as well as to male homosexuality. This point effectively answers the liberal argument (see above) that the proscription of homosexual relationships in the New Testament is really about pederasty or abuse of power in unequal relationships, because the context will not support such a narrowing of Paul's concern.

The Pauline phrase "God gave them up" occurs three times, indicating that the condition fallen human beings find themselves in is a natural consequence of turning from God. Contrary to the idea that God sends further punishment on those who disobey, the picture here in Romans is that the misuse of sexuality itself is a kind of punishment for abandoning the ways of the true God,²⁸ rather than a specific punishment for the misuse. Thus idolatry, the major theme of the passage, finally debases both the worshiper and the idol. The creature's impulse toward self-glorification ends in self-destruction. "The refusal to acknowledge God as creator ends in blind distortion of the creation."²⁹

3. *1 Corinthians 6:9–11 and 1 Timothy 1:10*. In these passages, those who practice homosexual behavior are included in lists of the kind of persons who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Both passages use the term *arsenokoitai*, a term not found prior to its appearance in 1 Corinthians 6. It seems to refer generically to men who lie with other men as with a woman, thus echoing the proscription of Leviticus.

In addition to *arsenokoitai*, 1 Corinthians 6:9 refers to *malakoi*, which was a common slang term in Hellenistic Greek for the passive partner in gay sexual relationships. The use of both terms here is another rebuttal to the liberal argument that the chief concern in these passages concerned pederasty, a point that would be more convincing if the consistent term were *malakoi*. To discern the larger point being made in these passages is the point. The one-flesh pattern of heterosexual marriage in Genesis was the background for the descriptions of sinful behavior in the letters to Timothy, to the Corinthians, and to the Romans. Because homosexual behavior was more common in the Greco-Roman world, there was a need to update and expand the list of actions contrary to the Decalogue by including homosexual behavior along with theft, adultery, and so on.

²⁸ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), vol. 1, 126–127.

²⁹ Hays, *Moral Vision*, 385.

In 1 Corinthians, we have the context of the kingdom of God. Those who habitually are adulterers, idolaters, thieves, drunkards, and greedy in character are not going to inherit the kingdom of God. Thus, we see not just a catalog of current vices, but a theological chain linking the will of God in creation to the qualities of character expected in the coming kingdom, clarified by reference to the Decalogue.³⁰

Scripture and the Larger Picture

A number of the arguments in favor of the blessing of same-sex unions acknowledge the reality of sin and the promise of resurrection life, but rely upon a stark contrast between the old eon and the new in which Christians live. Some liberals appeal to Acts 15 and the council of Jerusalem, for example, arguing that the situation of contemporary Christians is analogous to that of Peter, who has a revelation of the new salvation-historical moment that makes it possible to move past outmoded norms. Similarly, appeals are sometimes made to Paul's claim that we in Christ have transcended the differences between "male and female" (Gal. 3:28), and this fundamentally changes rules governing sexual relations. Or, consider the much later argument that many of the Torah's requirements may be summed up as temporary ceremonial laws which Christ has come to abolish. Making the Levitical prohibition of same-sex relations analogous to the regulations about impurity is a standard strategy.³¹ Christians ought to understand the resurrection to be the renewal of the created *order*, but this created order retains its meaning and form; it is, after all a created order. What has been done away with is not the order of creation but the futility of sin, our inability to restore our damaged relationship with God. Now this continuity of the created order includes human nature as created by God, and so the divine intention of the union of male and female in one flesh. This entails the social, psychological, and physical union, including the fruitfulness of childbearing as part of the order of creation. The citation by Jesus in Mark 10 (and parallels) of this Genesis passage reaffirms the perpetual continuity of this principle of creation.

Living in the hope of the resurrection of the body reminds us that God is restoring creation, not abolishing the old and replacing it with

³⁰ David Field, "Homosexuality," in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 451–452.

³¹ So L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*.

something very different. The world that God is and will be renewing retains its intended shape.³² Now in the “in-between” time in which we live, this process is incomplete, and we still need the guidance and the reproof of the law, for we still struggle to live into the new world God has granted to us (so Romans 6). Christians are not saved by the law, but by God’s grace; yet the Christian life is not antinomian, because the law has an instructive and illuminative function.

It follows then that when we think about marriage and family we need to think about God’s work in creation and in redemption as aspects of a single gracious intention for us. As St. Irenaeus struggled against the Gnostics, we hold creation and redemption closely together. This is no less true when we think about the gift of marriage within the new dispensation of grace. Here the key passage is, of course, Ephesians 5:31–32: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.” Here Paul³³ gives us a new and spiritual meaning for marriage, for it is to be a living symbol of the love that Christ has for his church. The fact that Paul obviously refers to the familiar Genesis text as Jesus did signifies that the expanded spiritual meaning and signification of marriage is firmly rooted in, and grows from, the inherited “one-flesh” physical-spiritual reality of creation. Male and female are not transcended; the mystical significance of marriage cannot support gnostic dualism, utopian reorganizations of sexuality and family life, or the current desire for same-sex marriages: husband and wife (plus progeny) is the pattern for sexuality to be discerned as God’s revealed will.

Part 3

Discerning the Sexual Patterns in Creation

The Theological Use of Science and Natural Law

In the marriage rite in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, the opening address of the priest to the man and woman to be married

³² Oliver O’Donovan has been eloquent on this theme in many of his works, including especially *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, second edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994).

³³ We are aware that there is some scholarly doubt about Paul’s authorship of Ephesians, but prefer to take the well-supported traditional position.

refers to God's establishment of marriage in creation, Jesus' presence at the wedding in Cana, and the mystical significance of the relationship between Christ and the church. The meaning of marriage pointed to by the rite combines the union of husband and wife on all levels: social and relational, psychological and spiritual, and physical and biological. Reference to the procreation and nurture of children is integral and essential to the biblical meaning of the union in one flesh of husband and wife.³⁴

The proposal to adopt same-sex marriage is not simply a matter of drawing the circle of eligibility a little wider to include those who are attracted to members of their own gender rather than the traditional male and female pairs. It is to change the nature and meaning of marriage in a fundamental way. More precisely, it is to drop essential aspects of the biblically depicted meaning of male and female marriage, untie the strands of purposes given to us by the Creator, and hold on only to those threads that we find convenient or appealing.

We realize that the methods of contraception and reproduction now available have obscured awareness of the meaning and purposes of sexuality and marriage as described by Christian theology. This is of course merely symptomatic of a much wider shift in Western thought from a discernment of meaning and purpose in nature to the attitude that nature—including our own human nature—is something on which we are free to impose our own will and purposes. The desire for technological control over a nature that is neutral or meaningless until we impose values and goals on it is deeply embedded in the modern Western mentality. It has generated impressive achievements in areas such as medicine, engineering, and agriculture, but also greater ability to damage our humanity and the environment.

When we apply the technological mentality to sexual relations, we get the common modern attitude that there are biological functions, with physiological, psychological, and social aspects. We as agents decide, based on our own values, what we want to get out of sex and sexual relationships. As Christians, however, we need to think what it means to find in sex and marriage a participation in a creation provided and intended for us by God. That we as creatures have no

³⁴ The inclusion of the phrase "when it is God's will" (1979 *BCP*, 423) is an ambiguous modification of the declaration of God's intention: it may properly be taken to refer to the contingency of age or physical condition of any particular couple, but it would be improper to take the phrase as implying that the procreation of children is something extraneous to or optional in God's intentions for marriage in general.

power to change the purposes inherent in the created order, and to suppose we can devise and impose our own desires and purposes, is a kind of Promethean self-deception.

What we offer in the two sections that follow is a summary of what can be discerned, for theological and moral purposes, from what we may call the realities of sexual patterns in creation. Because sexuality itself is so multifaceted, in the first section we deal specifically with an issue that is at the crux of our discussion about same-sex marriage: the state of scientific knowledge about homosexuality and same-sex attraction. We aim to show that support for homosexuality does not adequately reflect the ambiguity characteristic of the research.

In the larger section that follows, we deal with homosexuality from the perspective of natural law. This approach is of course philosophical rather than “scientific” in the modern sense, but it is also based on reason in that it seeks to discern patterns from the created order in philosophical and theological reflection. The concept of “natural law” is easily misunderstood, and we take some care to avoid misconceptions and exaggerated claims.

Homosexuality and Science

In public and mainline church circles support for the homosexual agenda assumes that same-sex attraction is *innate*. Part of the conservative reluctance to accede to the momentum toward approving same-sex marriage is the conviction that the actual evidence to back up a shift in policy is weaker than many realize. The prevalence of homosexuality, for example, may be exaggerated to a range close to 10 percent when 2 percent would be more accurate.³⁵

Central to the argument for normalizing same-sex relationships within the Episcopal Church and other Christian groups is the assumption that homosexual orientation or attraction to members of one’s own gender is something fixed and innate. Gays and lesbians often report that from the earliest point of sexual interest and self-awareness they find themselves attracted not to the opposite sex, but to their own, and the conclusion is drawn that the inclination must have been present from birth.

³⁵ The 10 percent figure has been quoted for more than fifty years since the methodologically questionable Kinsey Report. Some of the difference between the higher and lower figures can be attributed to whether one includes or excludes a large group of those who do not report exclusive same-sex attractions.

The liberal argument then goes on to treat such same-sex attractions as natural, i.e., occurring within the natural order, they thus should be considered part of the category of creation. Both the secular versions of celebrating diversity and “gay pride” and the claim of homosexual Christians to be naturally the way they are (“God made me this way”) have convinced many that a significant part of the population is simply born with a different set of sexual responses and inclinations which we should all accept as natural, normal variations, and for Christians, part of God’s creation.

This view of the normality and naturalness of same-sex attraction has rapidly secured wide acceptance. As a recent example, it is instructive to consider the recent project of two Roman Catholic moral theologians, Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler, who argue for a liberal view that opposes their church’s official teaching.

Salzman and Lawler offer a good example of how people turn the ambiguity of scientific knowledge about homosexuality into an assumed consensus to justify their project:

There is growing agreement also in the scientific community that sexual orientation, heterosexual or homosexual, is an innate condition over which the person has no control and that she or he cannot change without psychological damage. In addition, because homosexual orientation is experienced as a given and not as something freely chosen, it cannot be considered unnatural, unreasonable, and therefore immoral, for morality presumes the freedom to choose.³⁶

In a few lines, these authors have managed to work in several highly questionable assumptions and assertions. Even when we set aside the logical confusion between orientation, behavior, and morality in the last sentence,³⁷ we have three fallacies needing correction: (1) that current science points to sexual orientation as basically innate; (2) that the attempt to change orientation necessarily causes harm; and (3) that if homosexuality is “given,” it cannot be considered “unnatural.” The rest of this section on scientific evidence will counter the first two

³⁶ Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 65.

³⁷ Traditional Catholic teaching would see the orientation as unnatural, but not immoral, because it is action and behavior that become the subject of morality. See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2357–2359.

points, and the section on natural law that follows will clarify what a *theological* notion of “unnatural” implies, and why it still applies.

*Is Homosexuality Innate?*³⁸

For our purposes here, we draw on two helpful summaries and overviews of the literature on science and homosexuality—one from 1994 and the other from 2008. Both of these were provided by practitioners in the field, and provided specifically for the benefit of Anglican discussions of homosexuality.³⁸ On the following page is a chart comparing these two reviews of the scientific literature on the factors influencing homosexuality (abbreviated as HS).

A common perception (aided by simplistic stories in the press) is that there is probably a genetic cause for homosexuality; and if the “gay gene” has not yet been discovered, research will eventually provide it. The main argument against this, cited in an overview of research by David de Pomerai, mentioned below, is the study of identical, or monozygotic, twins. When one twin is homosexual the other twin, since he shares the same genes for height, hair color, etc., ought also to be homosexual (if the genetic theory of origin is to be valid). This is true in less than half of the cases, however, suggesting that genetic influence is of some significance, but not decisive. As Tom Brown summarized, we may accept that there is some genetic basis for homosexuality, but this is not to concede genetic determinism. Parallels suggested by Brown are musical ability and temperamental inclinations toward introversion or extroversion: there is a genetic component, certainly, to temperament and musical talent, but the role of environmental influence and personal psychological processing is also highly important.

Both studies stress that the evidence does not point to a “gay gene” or a single biological cause. In fact, it is unlikely that there is an “innate” causal factor (or set of factors), because the role of environment (psychosocial factors) is also extremely important. De Pomerai’s

³⁸ The work of J. Bancroft, “Homosexual Orientation: The Search for a Biological Basis,” *British Journal of Psychiatry* 164 (1994): 437–40, summarized by Tom Brown, “A Psychiatrist’s Perspective,” in Timothy Bradshaw, ed., *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church*, second edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), 137–144. The more recent survey is David de Pomerai, “Biological Mechanisms in Homosexuality: A Critical Review,” in Philip Groves, ed., *The Anglican Communion and Homosexuality: A Resource to Enable Listening and Dialogue* (London: SPCK, 2008), 268–292.

**Assessments of the Theories of Homosexual Origins
in 1994 and 2008**

	Bancroft (1994)	De Pomerai (2008)
Genetics	There is undoubtedly some evidence that genetic factors are of “some significance” in determining sexual orientation, especially in men.	<p>HS is unlikely to be caused by a single variant gene. The situation may be more like multi-gene disorders, where a variant gene or a combination of such may confer susceptibility to the condition, dependent on interaction with environmental factors and other genes.</p> <p>Evidence from studies of identical twins is relevant here.</p>
Nurture (psychosocial)	There is “a lot of room for environmental influences.”	Environmental factors are of undoubted importance.
Hormonal Influences	By the early 1990s, theories of hormonal balance <i>in utero</i> were no longer considered relevant.	Slight revival of these theories: some suggest that female HS may be linked to high androgen exposure, and male HS to low androgen exposure. The evidence is “weak and confusing.”
Fraternal Birth Order	Not considered.	There is an increase in the prevalence of HS among younger brothers (no similar effect for female HS). This might be related to the mother becoming progressively immunized against male-specific proteins.

overview reminds us that there are different categories of homosexuals, and that some mechanisms will apply to one category more than another; that there are multiple causes; and that the “relative proportions of these elements in the total mixture” will vary from individual to individual.³⁹

The rather agnostic concluding sentences in de Pomerai’s review are far indeed from supporting the assumption that homosexual orientation is innate: “Only a complex and highly variable mixture of underlying mechanisms—some biological, as well as some psychosocial—seems adequate to explain the reality of HS in human society, and no single mechanism can claim to hold the key to HS. This is the biological reality with which theologians must grapple.”⁴⁰ Taken in the context of de Pomerai’s careful assessment of the recent studies and literature, such a judgment should keep us from making arguments and forming positions based on the assumption that all homosexuals are inherently so from birth.

Is Change in Orientation Possible?

The issue of change is more problematic, both in terms of evaluating the evidence, and in terms of the role of agenda and hidden assumptions that shape the research and conclusions. We should note that the American Psychological Association at their 2009 annual meeting strongly cautioned their members about the methods and claims of sexual orientation treatment programs.

Within the past ten years or so, several studies have tried to assess the effectiveness of programs designed to help those with unwanted same-sex attractions to change.⁴¹ Care must be taken in evaluating the studies and data because of problems of definition, size of samples, the type of counseling, and the ambiguities of program outcomes. Glynn Harrison’s evaluation does not condemn such counseling ministries, but points out the dangers of crude theories, false and exaggerated claims, and poor interventions by insensitive or poorly trained counselors.

³⁹ De Pomerai, “Biological Mechanisms,” 290.

⁴⁰ De Pomerai, “Biological Mechanisms,” 290.

⁴¹ The main studies have been by Nicolosi et al. (2000), Spitzer (2003), and Jones and Yarhouse (2007) and are reviewed by Glynn Harrison, “Unwanted Same-Sex Attractions: Can Pastoral and Counseling Interventions Help People to Change?” in Groves, ed., *The Anglican Communion and Homosexuality*, 293–332.

Harrison points to (1) a conservative estimate of the possibility of “significant changes” in patterns of unwanted same-sex attraction, in the 10–15 percent range, and (2) a larger proportion who are able to bring their unwanted same-sex attractions “into line with their values” in the face of a persisting mix of sexual attractions.⁴² Harrison rightly reminds us of the very real risk of harm in some cases. This implies the need to set clear and high standards that require informed consent by counselee and appropriate training for counselors in such programs or ministries.

Creation, Natural Law, and Modern Culture

We have been proceeding in our argument about the shape of creation, even in this era after the resurrection, by referring to Scripture and thinking about the implications of its words for our Christian lives. This biblical-theological argument is bolstered by an argument of a more philosophical sort that the tradition has called “natural law.”

The theory of natural law, developed in classical philosophy and in patristic and scholastic theology, attempts to account for the awareness of certain general moral principles that human beings have apart from specifically religious teachings. Human nature is rational, with the ability to have purposes and give reasons for social and moral actions. This allows us to discern meanings and purposes in the structure of the world and to draw moral conclusions from reflecting on the nature of human life.⁴³

For Christian theology, the claim of natural law is both weakened and strengthened by scriptural revelation. On the one hand, the Bible informs us of the reality of sin and the fall that weaken confidence in the ability of human reason to discern reality accurately and to draw proper moral conclusions. Yet, we note that in Romans 2:12–16 Paul argues that Gentiles without Mosaic Law are still accountable based on some moral knowledge they are believed to possess.

On the other hand, natural law is strengthened because Christians can speak more confidently about guidance through natural law because of the knowledge that the world we know provides us with

⁴² Harrison, “Unwanted Same-sex Attractions,” 328.

⁴³ For definitions, see A. H. Holmes, “Natural Law,” in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, 619–621, and Jean Porter, *Natural and Divine Law: Reclaiming the Tradition for Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), esp. 63–64.

certain purposes and guidelines. Certain meanings and purposes in creation can be discerned from careful reflection on our experience of life in the world, because they express God's care and wisdom in creation, and allow us to speak about the guidance offered by this reflection as moral authority.⁴⁴ God instructs us about some of these purposes through scriptural revelation while others are left for us to discern through reflection and reason. The Reformed Protestant tradition distinguished "special" from "general" revelation to indicate the difference between knowledge through Scripture and knowledge through natural law, and that God as creator is the ultimate source of all truth. The love and wisdom of God lie behind the created order in which we live and allow Christians to have more confidence, especially with Scripture, to affirm meaning and purpose in the world. Yet even without a Jewish or Christian perspective, there is order and meaning to be perceived. Oliver O'Donovan, in a recent treatment dealing specifically with our thinking about homosexuality, wrote:

Any purposes God has in making the world are to be discerned in the world; they are not set apart from it somewhere else. Any discernment of how the world works will . . . be a discernment of the purposes of God. No "presupposition" is required for this discernment other than that it is a *morally intelligible* world, a world in which there is good and evil to be distinguished, a world fit for humans to act in.⁴⁵

The general moral dimensions of life can then be discerned by human reason. Christians can reflect on this moral reality in light of Scripture. We can reason about the nature of human society and government, the meaning and purpose of punishment, the nature of health and medicine, the education of children, principles of economics, and the relations between nations, to name some examples. The theories and approaches developed have sometimes been wrong-headed, of course, and need to be guided, ultimately, by a solid link with the reality and truth of human nature and society.

⁴⁴ We have referred above to Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*. See also his discussion of authority and its connection to reality, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005).

⁴⁵ See the important chapter "Creation, Redemption, and Nature" in Oliver O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2008), 86–101, at 96–7.

Christian thought mutually corroborates Scripture, which can be seen as special revelation, and insights from the natural moral order. Where there is an overlap between these two—for example, in those portions of the Decalogue that deal with murder, adultery, lying, and stealing—the rationale of biblical law makes the conclusions of reason clear and certain.⁴⁶ From this perspective, the defender of the traditional family has a measure of confidence in the clarity and certainty about the principle that marriage is between a man and a woman. This is not only because this has seemed self-evident to virtually every human society, but also because it is a principle clearly articulated by the creation narrative in Genesis and reinforced in the teaching of Jesus (Mark 10:6–9 and parallels) and other parts of Scripture.

Confusion and skepticism now surround the natural law argument. This is one reason the liberal case seems to carry such force in our time. One basis for confusion is the belief that conservative proponents of natural law are asserting that principles of natural law are inherent in human consciousness (perhaps from birth), and that modern anthropology, multicultural awareness, and postmodern suspicion of universal moral claims have invalidated appeal to natural law. Yet traditionally, natural law (as in Aquinas) is not based on inherent common human knowledge, but on the *accessibility* of moral principles to human reflection.⁴⁷ Oliver O'Donovan's preference for speaking of "objective moral order" rather than "natural law" reflects the problems associated with traditional terminology, including exaggerated claims made for natural law in the recent past, and with the conflation of natural moral law with natural laws in a physical or biological sense.

Even with this qualification, the claim that reason can discern moral principles by reflecting on the world and human society involves discerning inherent purposes in the natural order, an attitude or framework of thought that is foreign to modern thought. The conservative appeal to such principles is met with strong skepticism and resistance. The reasons for this are highly important and complex, woven into the development of the culture of Western modernity during the last five hundred years. Western science shifted away from an Aristotelian teleological view of nature to an inert instrumental view of nature subject to human will. The meanings and purposes of

⁴⁶ See the discussion of Thomas Aquinas on the old law in the *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 99, a. 2.

⁴⁷ See *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 94, a. 4.

nature, including human beings and their social arrangements, have been regarded as imposed by human will rather than inherent in the order of things.

If we take, for example, the world's wealth of land, mineral resources, water, forests, and so on, as so much raw material, simply "there" in existence, it is up to us to decide what to do with them. We impose principles of ownership and use by social and political agreement. What even most Christians have largely forgotten is the conviction—foundational for Augustine and the church fathers, as well as for Aquinas and the scholastics—that God provided the world's resources to sustain humankind in general. To hoard or squander these resources, or to ruin or destroy sections of the earth—which from a free market and private property perspective are legitimate "rights" of ownership—are really an abuse of the fundamental purpose of God's intention to make generous provision for humanity in creation. They are also contrary to God's instructions to tend and preserve creation (Gen. 2:15).

The operative influence in the current suspicion of a natural law argument (especially as applied to sexual relations) is the discredit stemming from the abuses and false claims made for natural law in the past. The struggle for equality in civil rights in the United States and the worldwide feminist movement have both exposed the shabby and self-serving arguments to support racism and male prerogatives on the basis of the supposed natural inferiority of blacks or women's inability to function as rationally as men. Many of these differences—which seemed to many people of the Victorian period to be rooted in nature—are now recognized as generated largely by social convention or prejudice.

Because the argument for an objective moral order seems to have so little force currently, many Western Christians may think that opposition to same-sex marriage is based on the same ignorant prejudice and unenlightened attitude that prevailed in colonies established by Western nations, in sections of America before the civil rights movement, and in institutions that treated women as inferior.

Natural Law and Sexual Relations

A strictly Darwinian point of view would reduce the purpose of sex to the preservation and betterment of the species. To the reductionist evolutionary biologist, all the psychological and romantic aspects of courtship and being in love are simply cultural constructs to

increase the desire to set aside objections to the difficulties and costs of child-rearing, and to fulfill the fundamental biological urge to procreate and enhance the human species. There is one procreative “purpose” to sexual relations, and the romantic and pleasurable aspects are useful concomitants.

The Christian tradition, on the other hand, when it has reflected more formally on these matters, as Augustine and Aquinas did, has discerned two fundamental purposes for human sexual relations: to produce children and to create a special bond of affection and support. In both modern Catholic encyclicals and Protestant ethical thought, these are known as the procreative and unitive purposes.

The influential Protestant ethicist Paul Ramsey, an important transmitter of many important principles from Catholic moral theology to Protestants, expressed well the importance of holding together the relational aspects of marriage with procreation: “Sexual intercourse tends, of its own nature, toward the expression and strengthening of love and towards the engendering of children. Let us call these two goods, or intrinsic ends, of sexual intercourse its relational or unitive and its procreative purpose.”⁴⁸ These differ from the purposes of *marriage* in the *Book of Common Prayer* because they are discerned philosophically by general moral reflection and do not include the theological purposes of Christian marriage: remedy for sin, and the sacramental signification of Christ and his church.

The Genesis stories bring out both the procreative and unitive purposes: the directive to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28), and the recognition of Adam’s need for companionship (“it is not good that the man should be alone,” Gen. 2:18). These are followed by the creation of a new family unit when husband and wife leave their parental homes and become one flesh together.

The preeminence formerly given to procreation as the primary good (reflected in the Roman Catholic tradition *before* the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*⁴⁹) should be seen as an understandable but regrettable distortion. There is logic in seeing the future of the human species as fundamental and the romantic elements as ancillary or subservient to the purpose of procreation. Thomas Aquinas may give this impression

⁴⁸ Paul Ramsey, *One Flesh: A Christian View of Sex Within, Outside and Before Marriage*, Grove Booklet on Ethics No. 8 (Bramcote, Notts: Grove Books, 1975), 4.

⁴⁹ See, for example, the 1930 papal encyclical *Casti Connubii* that made procreation the primary purpose, whereas *Humanae Vitae* considers the procreative and unitive ends of sexual relations as equally essential.

in his defense of the permanence of marriage (and the sin of fornication) based on the lengthy time required for child-rearing and the value of a stable home, but in his defense we can note that he also affirmed the unitive good of marital friendship and the inherent good of sexual pleasure.⁵⁰ It is also possible to construct an argument, as Philip Turner has done, defending the permanence and exclusivity of sexual relations based not on the procreative good, but on the relational good, reflecting on the nature of committed human love.⁵¹

Where the Christian tradition would have affirmed that the *nature* of sexual relations implied the inherently dual combined purpose of procreation and marital friendship, the current view tends to separate these. The blessing of same-sex unions would advance the sundering of this nexus of meaning, and so lead to further confusion about basic Christian views on sexual identities and relationships. However, there are other factors in current thinking as well. The prospect of overpopulation and scarcity of resources has changed procreation from a self-evident purpose to fulfill to something that requires special moral justification. This has made it seem all the more reasonable to see the romantic, unitive purpose of sexual relations as completely determinative. With the relegation of any procreative purpose, the unitive purpose no longer serves child-rearing or family life, but instead serves self-expression, personal pleasure, and marital friendship of varying degrees of commitment. Procreation becomes an optional “project” for those so inclined or for those guided by social expectations.

The liberal view of same-sex marriage requires eliminating procreation as an inherent meaning of sexual relations. This allows the liberal to argue that same-sex marriages can embody a kind of complementarity based on psychological or social fulfillment or incorporation of the “other” parallel to, or a valid variation of, ordinary heterosexual male-female complementarity.⁵²

Here the conservative response must be firm. The inherent procreative purpose of sexual relationships must be respected and

⁵⁰ *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 154, a. 2.

⁵¹ See “Real Sex” in Philip Turner, *Sex, Money, and Power: An Essay in Christian Social Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1985), 45–70.

⁵² See the helpful treatment of the view of sexual difference in the Christian tradition as compared to some modern liberal views in Christopher C. Roberts, *Creation and Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007).

embodied in Christian marriage. This does not require the unnecessarily stringent requirement of respect for procreation in every sexual act (as implied in *Humanae Vitae*), nor does it imply that a marriage foreseen to be childless (as when the parties to the marriage are beyond normal child-rearing age) is inappropriate. It does, however, at the very least, imply a marital partnership of a man and a woman. If the procreative purpose of sexual relations is co-determinative with the unitive and social purpose, then it automatically defines the romantic or social marital union as a male-female one, since that is the only sexual union that could be procreative.

In describing the essential relation of man and woman in sex and marriage, Oliver O'Donovan puts the matter in a clear and conclusive way:

The dimorphic organization of human sexuality, the particular attraction of two adults of the opposite sex and of different parents, the setting up of a home . . . and the uniting of their lives . . . form a pattern of human fulfillment which serves the wider end of enabling procreation to occur in a context of affection and loyalty. *Whatever happens in history, Christians have wished to say, this is what marriage really is.* Particular cultures may have distorted it; individuals may fall short of it. It is to their cost in either case; for it reasserts itself as God's creative intention for human relationships on earth.⁵³

That we suppose ourselves to have moved beyond this, or that we can reconfigure the goods of marriage which can be discerned by natural law, says something significant about ourselves as modern thinkers, and not about the nature of marriage itself, which from the point of view of a theology of creation must remain constant and consistent.

Part 4

Concluding Reflections

There has been a strong desire in recent decades to emphasize an orientation to mission as constitutive of the nature of the church. The high-profile issue of homosexuality in our culture is an important

⁵³ O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 69 (italics added).

testing point of our relationship with contemporary culture and of the soundness of our strategy of witness and mission.

Our discussion of the evidence of science and insights from philosophy on the issue of homosexuality is meant to help us draw practical conclusions and guidelines for a collective decision about same-sex marriage, and not merely to help our theoretical understanding. This then brings us squarely into the forum of our contemporary culture, whether in its modernist or postmodern mood. This realm of culture is of great concern to the church as it tries to engage its context and communicate its message. The standard contemporary terms for describing this area of the church's relationship to culture have been "inculturation" or "contextualization." This leads us to pose the question: What would a properly inculturated or contextualized theology of sexuality for the church in North America look like?

The liberal approach tends to look too favorably on the surrounding culture. As conservatives, we want the church to be faithful to the Great Commission and to find the best ways to witness to our culture, having in mind the warning and encouragement articulated by the apostle Paul: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Rom. 12:2). The issue before us now, whether to approve of same-sex marriage, is for our time a major challenge to the quality and confidence of our Christian minds: do we judge homosexuality in light of the standards of our culture or in conformity with the mind of Christ?

This discernment cannot simply rely upon the growing consensus in the general public and society's legislatures and law courts to determine our attitudes and positions, because the church needs to be faithful to its own theological criteria for assessment and above all to be faithful to the will of our Lord. The appeal to justice and fairness, which carries so much weight in public opinion and in civil society, should not be the determining consideration. We should all be more aware of those salient features of our culture as a whole which unconsciously shape our attitudes, skew our perceptions, and distort our decisions. Through sexuality, modern Western culture (as seen in much of its literature, cinema, music, popular culture, consumerism, and fascination with shallow celebrity) seeks a set of goods largely different from what Christian theology wants to affirm. Instead of a proper emphasis on faithfulness and mutual service as the context for affection, sexual pleasure, and family life, the goods desired by our

society are often gratification, self-expression, and novel experiences. The consumerist nature of our society affects sexuality by commodifying and depersonalizing sexual experience. The technological mentality leads us to treat sex and other areas of behavior as devoid of inherent meaning and thus allows us to give ourselves the freedom to impose our own values and needs under the framework of a right to our chosen self-expression. These cultural attitudes are often heightened in North America where we find heavy emphasis on individualism and subjective autonomy. Understanding recent intellectual and cultural history is of great importance in realizing why traditional Christian teaching on marriage and sexuality has lost much of its persuasive power.

Where We Are

We can set down as a clear expression of our position a section of the “St. Andrew’s Day Statement” offered about fifteen years ago by a number of respected theologians in the Church of England:

The primary pastoral task of the church in relation to all its members, whatever self-understanding and mode of life, is to re-affirm the good news of salvation in Christ, forgiveness of sins, transformation of life and incorporation into the holy fellowship of the church. In addressing those who understand themselves as homosexual, the church does not cease to speak as the bearer of this good news. It assists all its members to a life of faithful witness in chastity and holiness, recognizing two forms of vocations in which that life can be lived: [traditional] marriage and singleness (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:4–6; 1 Cor. 7 passim). There is no place for the church to confer legitimacy upon alternatives to these.⁵⁴

We agree with the authors who follow this statement of theological definition with the recognition that a “certain flexibility”⁵⁵ is required in responding to different individuals and circumstances, and in discerning the ways in which the gospel touches people in different situations.

Many readers and observers, both within and outside of the church, will interpret any provision short of marriage for homosexuals

⁵⁴ “St. Andrew’s Day Statement,” in Bradshaw, ed., *The Way Forward*, 5–11 at 8–9.

⁵⁵ “St. Andrew’s Day Statement,” 9.

as unfair, lacking in compassion, and perpetuating attitudes that liberals feel called to challenge and change. In the light of our position in support of traditional Christian marriage articulated above, we believe that the range of legitimate possible pastoral responses, as policy for the Episcopal Church (or for a diocese or parish), is limited. For the individual counselor or parish priest there may be room for some discretion or flexibility, but given that the demand is for same-sex *marriage*, it is difficult to see room for compromise.

There is the option of simply continuing the “policy” of not doing or saying very much at all on an official level, combined with pastoral openness. More than in the past, there will be parishes, bishops, and priests who know that many parishioners are in fact homosexual, and realize that the church has always had a percentage of homosexual members in its midst. This ambiguous treatment is unsatisfactory for many gays and lesbians, however, who feel that they need to hide an important part of their identity when engaged in worship or other parish activities or simply to belong to the church.

This is analogous to the notorious “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy of the American military sanctioned by President Clinton, and still in effect (at the time of writing). Here there is a tacit understanding all around that homosexuals are understood to make up a certain percentage of the military, and that there will be no official attempt to harass or discourage them. On the other hand, gay and lesbian soldiers and officers do not have permission to live in open and active same-sex relationships.

Life in a parish, we note, is often far better than this crude military policy. Many parish priests are trusted as confessors, counselors, and confidants, so that there is often the possibility of individual understanding and support in spite of the lack of official diocesan or parochial affirmation. There must be many (probably the majority of) traditional parish priests in this position who do not feel able to change their position on the theology of marriage, but who have ongoing positive relationships with individuals (or couples) who are gay or lesbian, and who encourage them to be part of parish life.

Traditionalists understand homosexual attraction as not following the intended order of creation. Even if we do not use the explicit language of the Roman Catholic magisterium,⁵⁶ same-sex relationships

⁵⁶ See the “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons” (1986), reprinted in Charles E. Curran and Richard A.

fall short of the order for sexual relationships affirmed in Genesis and in the teaching of Jesus. However, so do many other sexual relationships in modern life, including, of course, those of many Christians and church members. Clergy have parishioners having affairs and experiencing marriage breakdowns; and, in the last generation or two, young couples are living together, some of whom seek Christian marriage in the local church. The difference is that the conservative parish priest will point out that such premarital sexual liaisons, even those which eventually do result in marital commitment, fall short of the biblical standards for marriage, and that a Christian wedding is a good opportunity for the pastor to deal with the element of disorder and conform the relationship to Christian standards.

Theologian Helmut Thielicke reminded us about fifty years ago of the vulnerabilities and frustrations faced by homosexuals who live with the combination of secret temptations and the need for a deceptive appearance in public. The Christian ethicist and pastor must be aware of and sensitive to this situation.⁵⁷ One benefit of the much greater openness in the last generation or two about homosexuality is the diminished pressure to disguise sexual orientation and the decrease in opprobrium.

Abstinence and Christian Discipleship

Thielicke spoke in the 1950s of helping people to “sublimate” their homosexual urges.⁵⁸ There is a quaintness about this in the twenty-first century, and many may find something impractical about it, much as some view the “abstinence only” style of conservative school sex education programs. Even though misunderstood and mocked in many circles, this aspect of Christian discipleship must remain a strong part of the church’s pastoral teaching. After all, learning to refuse to indulge sexual urges is part of the general spiritual discipline that needs to be developed in many other areas of life and is part of the way of the cross. This aspect of Christian discipleship applies, of course, not only to the homosexually inclined, but to all those not

McCormick, eds., *Readings in Moral Theology No. 8: Dialogue about Catholic Sexual Teaching* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1993), 297–308.

⁵⁷ Helmut Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex* (London: James Clarke, 1964), 286–287; the English translation was published later as the third volume of *Theological Ethics*, the first German edition of which was published in 1958–1959.

⁵⁸ Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex*, 287.

in a marital relationship: we think of the widowed and divorced, college students and other youth before marriage, and those whose circumstances involve long periods of separation from spouses. Many people are looking for instruction and practical help in this area of Christian training.

The Possibility of Change in Orientation

We note that in the 1950s Thielicke wrote from the premise that “the great majority of homosexuals” are in a condition that is not susceptible to medical or psychotherapeutic treatment.⁵⁹ Even on those assumptions, however, that would still leave a minority who experience unwanted same-sex attractions and might benefit from a course of counseling or treatment aimed at developing heterosexual inclinations.

We realize that this will seem wrong-headed and even arrogant to many, including many heterosexuals who feel sympathy with the important LGBTQ movement. We must admit the dangers involved in such counseling, and the risk of increasing confusion and alienation. But even if we do agree that talk of change toward heterosexuality is inappropriate and unhelpful in many cases, there is still evidence that some positive and beneficial change can and does take place as a result of some ministries and programs. With the help of a number of recent studies, and recognizing that this area is still somewhat unclear and very controversial, it seems fair to say that a modest percentage (perhaps 10–15 percent) of those with same-sex attractions can achieve noticeable change.⁶⁰

Admittedly, this pastoral approach applies only to a minority—nevertheless it should not be dismissed as impossible or unethical. There is a continuum between homo- and heterosexual inclinations, and some fluidity between them, as well as a lack of agreement about the actual genesis of homosexual inclinations. It seems inappropriate to deny a voice in our discussions to ex-gays who have left homosexual lifestyles (and may still have same-sex inclinations), and to those involved in responsible ministry programs with them.

⁵⁹ Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex*, 283–284.

⁶⁰ See our summary above in the section on Science and Homosexuality with reference to Glynn Harrison’s study, “Unwanted Same-Sex Attractions: Can Pastoral and Counseling Interventions Help People to Change?” in Groves, ed., *The Anglican Communion and Homosexuality*, 293–332 at 328.

To deny the very possibility of change in the complicated process of sexual inclination and attachment seems theologically akin to questionable approaches to solve difficult theological and pastoral problems with an a priori definition. One example would be the ultra-Calvinist doctrine of eternal security, where defenders of the “once saved, always saved” principle deal with those who leave the church or seem to abandon faith in Christ as simple impossibilities: if they have no faith now, then they were never Christians at all. Similarly, under the Roman Catholic doctrine of marriage, if a separation or breakdown occurs between two Christians sacramentally married, the marriage is still valid or it was never a proper marriage in the first place. Hence, many annulments function as practical divorces.

As pastoral provisions for homosexuals the options of sublimation, abstinence, and therapeutic change, where appropriate, are limited, to be sure. Sublimation and abstinence—i.e., chastity—in the context of Christian discipleship will present a challenge for us to present as an attractive option in current culture, we admit. In most cases, with heterosexual young people, for example, sexual abstinence is normally meant to be a temporary aspect of moral character, in preparation for marital chastity. It is one thing for young singles, the newly divorced, and the recently widowed to learn (or relearn) celibacy as a single person, and quite another for single homosexuals who face, without an option for marriage, an entire lifetime of singleness. We recognize the extra burden and challenge involved. The call and gift to live a celibate life is a special vocation, given to individuals both heterosexual and homosexual who respond to the call to celibacy in conjunction with a special (usually religious) vocation. We are aware that the traditionalist opposition to same-sex marriage will seem inflexible and even wrong-headed; and the injustice of a position requiring all gays and lesbians either to adhere to *lifelong* abstinence or to seriously contemplate a course of counseling toward heterosexual attraction will make the possible provision of Christian same-sex marriage seem a very reasonable and compassionate solution.

We need to explain further the basis for our opposition to this attractive line of reasoning in our church, namely, to have as official policy the open acceptance and blessing of same-sex relationships, even if they reflect the same level of commitment and permanence as heterosexual marriages do. We can make a few additional points to explain our reluctance and resistance.

1. First, the apparent injustice of imposing abstinence on gays and lesbians is partly a reflection of the current tolerance, even in church circles, of temporary and semi-committed sexual relationships between men and women. This tolerance points to doubts or confusion about the truth or relevance of the standards of self-discipline and self-denial that need to be applied to sexual behavior. These modern doubts reflect the common and unspoken assumption that an active sexual relationship is necessary for a fulfilling life, unless there is a special grace given by the Spirit for celibacy. The clear implication is that being a single person without a sexual relationship is so difficult that only a select few can be expected to receive this charism.⁶¹

2. Further, some heterosexuals' circumstances call for living as chaste single persons even though they are without a vocation to celibacy. There are those who postpone marriage in favor of a career or are forced to be celibate because of circumstances and then find few or no prospects for a good marriage later on. Others face social situations with an imbalance in the number of eligible potential spouses.⁶² The disabled or those disfigured by disease or accident have limited marital prospects. Many men and women had high ideals for a potential spouse yet found no one to meet them. Others who would very much like to have married simply found no one with whom to enter into a marriage covenant. All of these people form a considerable section of the population, who have neither chosen to live life as singles nor had a special vocation to celibacy, but have had singleness and chastity imposed on them by circumstance.

3. A third point deserves attention. We are concerned for a number of homosexuals who have turned away from sexual partnerships because they have risen to the challenge of traditional Christian discipleship and believe that calls for sexual abstinence. The church's acceptance of same-sex marriage would undercut some of their motivation to the celibate life. Thus, while on the grounds of justice or compassion we attempt to provide for some homosexual persons by

⁶¹ The growing movement within the Roman Catholic Church to end the requirement of clerical celibacy is often supported by assertions that it is wrong to expect all priests to receive the gift of celibacy at their ordination.

⁶² Consider England (and other countries) after World War I when the supply of young men for a whole generation was substantially reduced; or consider present-day China and India where the supply of young women does not meet the demand for marriages because of culturally or politically imposed child-selection practices.

accepting same-sex relationships under the framework of holiness, we may well be adding to the burden of others who have the same-sex attractions. Instituting same-sex marriage would potentially discourage homosexual Christians who are quietly pursuing their call to Christian discipleship within the traditional sexual boundaries.

A homosexual Anglican in England who is not at all convinced that homosexual relationships are pleasing to God writes candidly, "I know many Anglicans (including leaders) with a homosexual orientation, but seeking celibacy, who have said privately they will feel betrayed if the Church of England changes its traditional viewpoint on homosexuality. Some say they already feel tempted to leave the Church of England."⁶³

The starkness of the conservative position is tempered by the reminder that our eroticized and materialist culture creates the framework so inimical to chastity and self-control. In a Christian theological perspective, our identity as members of the body of Christ, not personal sexual feelings and experiences, defines who we are. As the "St. Andrew's Day Statement" puts it: "At the deepest ontological level, therefore, there is no such thing as 'a' homosexual or 'a' heterosexual; there are human beings, male and female, called to redeemed humanity in Christ, endowed with a complex variety of emotional potentialities and threatened by a complex variety of forms of alienation."⁶⁴

We need to put the inflated importance we attach to sexual fulfillment and even marriage into perspective. We have the teaching of Jesus about the disappearance of marriage and family relationships in the kingdom of heaven, and we have the examples and teaching of both Jesus and Paul, who made clear that sexual needs, expressions, and relationships are temporary and secondary compared to our destiny as co-heirs with Christ. "The goal for homosexual and heterosexual alike is fulfillment and wholeness in Christ."⁶⁵ Recovery and proclamation of that conviction is the challenge for our church.

⁶³ Martin Hallett, "Truth and Love in Our Sexual Feelings," in Bradshaw, ed., *The Way Forward*, 130.

⁶⁴ "St. Andrew's Day Statement," in Bradshaw, ed., *The Way Forward*, 7.

⁶⁵ D. H. Field, "Homosexuality," in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, 453.