

GENDER MATTERS: HUMAN SEXUALITY AND THE BIBLE YET AGAIN

Dr. Ben Witherington, III
Amos Professor of NT for Doctoral Studies
Asbury Theological Seminary
Doctoral Faculty, St. Andrews University, Scotland

Marshall McLuhan made the arresting observation that nature has not equipped [hu]mankind with earlids. But we compensate for nature's oversight by developing selective listening. We are conveniently deaf to sounds that challenge our pride, or command our obedience, or interrupt our fantasies, or call attention to our lapses. 'Heavy ears' make it possible to pursue wrongful pleasures, indulge empty dreams, and escape onerous tasks with only a minimal discomfort of conscience. But the convenience is purchased at an exorbitantly high price: we sacrifice great chunks of reality for these brief, superficial, and mostly doggish comforts.---- Eugene Peterson¹

The debate about what the Bible does and does not say, does and does not require, does and does not advise when it comes to human sexual behavior shows no signs of abating in the twenty-first century in North America, Europe, and in the so-called Western world in general, especially in the light of recent cultural shifts of opinions about whether or not same-sex sexual relations and same-sex marriage are a good and normal thing or not, never mind a godly thing.

This debate has already led to various church splits and numerous lawsuits, and yet more appear to be on the near horizon. In my own case, the controversy which has been troubling my own United Methodist Church since the late 1960s now seems likely to lead to a parting of the ways. In one sense, this is a rather sad but accurate sign and indicator of the great importance of the issue.

It is no small thing for a church to change its position of what is and isn't moral when it comes to human sexual behavior, especially when it has been the almost universal and univocal position of the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Churches from the beginning of church history until well into the 20th century that same-sex sexual relations, never mind same sex marriage is an absolute violation of

¹ E. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, (Harper, 1988), p. 49.

the ethical code of the Bible, and a repudiation of the Bible's theology of creation and marriage.

In this essay, my aim is to point out some problems with the whole way this discussion has proceeded, and the way the Bible has been *misused* in the process to justify 'new' positions on these sorts of matters. I will also be addressing the authority issue involved, for make no mistake, underlying this whole discussion is various assumptions about whether the Bible has the authority to define human sexual behavior for Christians or not, in the 21st century. Put succinctly, the question is--- Does the Bible address the issue of same sex sexual expression (and marriage), and if it does, does the Bible take a definitive position on such issues? Even if the answer to the last question is yes, the question then becomes are the views expressed in the Bible *normative* for the church today, or even more provocatively, do they reflect not merely ancient human opinions about the matter, but God's view of the matter? Inquiring minds want to know.

I. The Shifting Sands of Interpretation of the Sex Texts

In a helpful essay, the OT scholar Christopher Seitz chronicles the various attempts over the last forty years, by scholars who have advocated a change in the way we read the Bible's sex texts, to *problematize* the way these texts have been traditionally, and almost universally read, in the past.² He distinguishes three phases in the discussion: 1) in phase one, Biblical passages on same-sex practices were re-evaluated.³ It was argued that these texts had been misunderstood for centuries and centuries; no one had come up with the right interpretation prior to the present. So, for example, as it turns out the sin of Sodom (Gen. 19.1-29) was not 'sodomy' but rather a violation of hospitality customs and laws. Or again, it was

² Christopher Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture. The Significance of a Two Testament Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), here pp. 176-77.

³ A good example of this phase of the discussion can be found in Richard Hays early critique in the late 70s and early 80s of the works of John Boswell and Robin Scroggs. See his later reflections on the debate in his *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, (Harper, 1996), pp. p. 379-406.

argued that Rom. 1.18-32 was condemning ‘unnatural’ or exotic same-sex misconduct (such as pederasty), but not same-sex practices *in toto*. Notice that in this phase of the discussion, the authority of the Scripture was *assumed to be final* and even applicable to today, and therefore it was just a matter of getting the exegesis right; 2) in phase two of the discussion, a more recent phase, it became common to suggest quite the opposite of this approach. Scholars were admitting that yes, the Bible condemns same-sex sexual activity and does not single out pederasty alone for such a critique. It was admitted that the Bible was consistently negative towards same-sex practices despite exegetical gymnastics trying to make the text say something else, but now it was suggested that the Bible doesn’t provide norms on such sexual ethical issues, but rather only a *rough guide* for how to make decisions about such matters, and the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 was seen as demonstrating that even on fundamental issues the early church was prepared to allow strong disagreements on such issues without dividing the church. “Acceptance and inclusion of gay Christians into today’s church it was argued should be patterned after the paradigm of the early church, which expanded its horizons by recognizing God’s Spirit at work in individuals previously excluded from the fellowship.”⁴

On this model, two hermeneutical moves are at work: A) some texts in the Scripture are seen as more authoritative in addressing difficult issues than others, despite the fact that it is admitted that various texts in the OT and in the NT do condemn same-sex sexual activity, and B) the living voice of the Spirit in the church today, like the living voice at work in the Acts 15 council, is assumed to be giving new guidance that in fact *contravenes and contradicts* previous teaching and praxis. On this model, the Bible is thought to still have some authority, but it is assumed that some ‘more enlightened’ portions of Scripture trump other portions, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Ironically, what has final authority on this approach

⁴ Bill Arnold, *Seeing Black and White in a Gray World. The Need for Theological Reasoning in the Church's Debate over Sexuality*, (Franklin Tn.: Seedbed Publishing, 2014), p. 110.

is the judgment of the individual who decides to privilege this text over that one, or this ethical norm over that one, not the Holy Spirit.

Finally, in phase three comes the argument that what the Bible teaches about same-sex sexual practices is irrelevant because those ancient writers were unaware of the modern practice of monogamous faithful homosexual practice, or even that such practice did not exist in the ANE or Greco-Roman world of the Biblical writers. A supplement to such arguments is that the Biblical writers were unaware of modern genetics or a 'Gay gene', or the fact that some persons are born with a same-sex orientation.

In this last phase of the argument, which appears, in the main, to be the phase in which we are in,⁵ the Bible has lost any final or canonical authority in such discussions and has been reduced to a somewhat antiquated (and often ill-informed) collection of views which can still be a resource for discussing sexual ethical issues and present life experiences, but at the end of the day 'we know better' than the Biblical writers about these matters in the light of modern genetics and science in general, and so the Bible has no ability to speak definitively or normatively about such matters.

What becomes apparent to those who, like myself, have been following this heated discourse and often rancorous debate over the last forty plus years, is that the Scriptures have been allowed less and less of an authoritative voice in the discussion, including in the discussion of the nature of marriage, in this case Christian marriage. Of course, if the Bible does in fact prohibit same-sex sexual activity and is deemed to have *some* normative authority in such ethical discussions, it quite naturally follows that same sex 'Christian' marriage is a non-starter, if not an oxymoron. If the former is ruled out categorically, then that entails the ruling out of the latter as well.⁶

⁵ See the analysis of Arnold pp. 111-112.

⁶ And here a distinction has to be made between civil unions recognized by secular authorities and businesses and health insurance companies and a Christian theology of marriage. One cannot expect in a religiously pluralistic culture for American laws and governmental officials to uphold a *specifically* Christian standard for such relationships. It is another matter to ask whether such officially recognized LGBT

Perhaps then it will be useful at this juncture, as a ground-clearing exercise, to talk about some of the erroneous assumptions, incorrect historical and exegetical analyses, and ethical distortions that have plagued this discussion from the outset, and continue to do so even when the relevance of the Biblical data is increasingly called into question.

II. Fallacies, Flaws, and False Starts

It is to be expected in an affective age, where many times over we hear the mantra 'I cannot deny my experience', that human experience is all too often taken to be the final arbiter of what is good and true and beautiful. The problem of course with having no external criteria by which to evaluate experience is that one has a hard time distinguishing between a heart-warming experience and heartburn, between lust and love, between an unhealthy and a healthy or a moral and an immoral encounter between two human beings. All human experiences, especially profound or even exhilarating ones, of course have a certain self-validating quality in the sense that they are 'genuine' experiences. But not all genuine or even profound experiences are good in themselves, or godly for that matter. And indeed there are plenty of experiences in life that may be pleasurable at the outset but end up being self-destructive and even soul destroying, for example the experiences which derive from the use of psychotropic drugs that are inherently and profoundly addictive, such as heroin.

It is thus a fallacy to think that all genuine experiences or even all pleasurable experiences, are good in themselves. It is also a fallacy to assume that whatever makes a person happy, must be good in itself.⁷ This is forgetting one of the most profound insights from the Scripture, namely that we are all fallen human beings with a rather remarkable capacity for rationalization, self-justification, and self-deception. The kleptomaniac gets great pleasure out of stealing things, often with

relationships, which have legal status, could also be seen to be *Christian* marriages. It is the latter question with which I am concerned in this essay when it comes to the issue of marriage.

⁷ And it can be added here that the goal of human life according to the Bible is not that we all be happy, whatever that means, but that we all be holy, as God is holy.

no remorse. The glutton often gets great pleasure out of eating too much, even the sort of foods that are bad for you. The pathological liar gets great pleasure out of spinning yarns that bear no resemblance to reality, and trying to pass them off as if they are accounts of real events. And so on. Experience is a remarkably *unreliable* guide to truth, perhaps especially when it comes to the truth about what amount to good and godly human sexual experiences and what do not.

It is furthermore simply not true that ‘I cannot deny my experience’. Indeed, there are all sorts of experiences that we have, that we can and should deny, and should seek never to repeat. Indeed there are many genuine human experiences we need to repent of and never do again. There are all sorts of desires and even lusts that we have that while perfectly genuine and natural for a fallen human being are neither good nor godly in the Christian sense of the word. *Experience may be a teacher, but it is not a final arbiter of truth*, and in the case of as complex an issue as the appropriate ways to express our human sexuality, it ought not to be allowed to have the final say over Scripture, tradition, or reason, all of which the church has deemed have higher authority and more truth-bearing capacity than mere genuine human experiences.⁸

It is also worth pointing out that the default assumption that an individual always best knows and understands himself, his own desires and inclinations, and so on, can and should be challenged. The philosopher Harry Frankfurt puts it this way: “there is nothing in theory, and certainly nothing in experience, to support the extraordinary judgment that it is the truth about himself that is the easiest for a person to know. Facts about ourselves are not peculiarly solid and resistant to skeptical dissolution. Our natures are, indeed, elusively insubstantial—notoriously less stable and less inherent than the nature of other things.”⁹ When one makes one’s own feelings, inclinations, or assumptions about one’s nature the measure of all things, and makes ‘being true to myself’ rather than being true to God or God’s Word or some other reliable outside barometer of reality, self-deception becomes

⁸ Indeed, historically, in most Christian traditions, ‘experience’ is not seen as an authority *at all*, compared to Scripture, reason, or tradition.

⁹ H. G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 2005), see pp. 64-67.

all too easy, especially when human nature is so malleable, flexible, impressionable, and sometimes quite chameleon-like. This is all the more the case when we realize that self-centeredness or narcissism is being exhibited at epidemic levels in our culture today, not least because it could be said to be the manifestation of the very essence of human fallenness-- 'the heart turned in upon itself'. Narcissistic navel-gazing seldom leads to a clearer perspective on what is true about oneself.

Another fallacy which should be mentioned at this juncture is the notion that modern same-sex experiences between consenting adults have no analogies in the Biblical world, and that therefore the Bible has nothing to say about such experiences. This is clearly *historically false*, and of course is just a way of trying to hold at arms length what the Bible does say about same-sex sexual practices. Equally false is the notion that Paul (seen as the perennial bad guy in discussions about these matters) is the first to suggest that same-sex sexual behavior is 'contrary to nature'. Consider for example the lengthy discussion of Richard Hays on this latter matter.

Hays first points out that Dio Chrysostom, the Stoic-Cynic philosopher says of Aphrodite: "the goddess Aphrodite, whose name stands for the natural (*kata physin*) intercourse and union of male and female" goes on to suggest that a society that allows prostitution will find that its uncontrolled lusts lead to even more deplorable practices such as pederasty for "is there any possibility that this lecherous class would refrain from dishonoring and corrupting the males...or will it not, while it satisfies its lust for women in every conceivable way, find itself grown weary of this pleasure, and then seek some other worse and more lawless form of wantonness?... The man whose appetite is insatiate in such things...will turn his assault against the male quarters, eager to befoul the youth who will very soon be magistrates and judges and generals" (*Discourse* 7.135,151-52). Of course this is chiefly a critique of pederasty, which may well have been the most common form of same-sex sexual expression in antiquity, but it was by no means the only form, and the key point here is that Dio Chrysostom is saying that such sexual expression that does not involve a male and a female is 'against nature', the very concept Paul himself uses in Rom. 1.18-32.

Hays goes on also to helpfully cite Plutarch in his *Dialogue on Love* 751C who stresses that unions between men are ‘contrary to nature’ as contrasted with ‘the love between men and women’. The root problem as Plutarch sees it here is same-sex, sexual activity, not pederasty.¹⁰ Such texts make clear that it is neither true that the Greco-Roman world had no problems with same-sex sexual activity, nor is it true that only pederasty was being critiquing in such texts, though pederasty was seen as the worst form of such behavior. And this brings us to Jewish writers of the NT period, such as Josephus and Philo.

Josephus, if anything, makes stronger points than those found in the Greco-Roman writers. He says, commenting on Leviticus 20.13 (cf. Lev. 18.22,29) that “the Law recognizes no sexual connections except for the natural (*kat physin*) union of man and wife, and that only for the procreation of children. But it abhors the intercourse of males with males, and punishes any who undertake such a thing with death” (Apion 2.199 cf. 2.273,275).

What about the notion that the Sodom story was about violations of hospitality? Philo is having none of it--- speaking of the inhabitants of Sodom he says they “threw off from their necks the law of nature (*ton tes physeos nomon*) and applied themselves to the deep drinking of strong liquor and dainty feeding and forbidden forms of intercourse. Not only in their mad lust for women did they violate the marriages of their neighbors, but also men mounted males.” Notice how he does not suggest here that the chief problem was rape—an act of violence, but rather same-sex intercourse. Philo then contrasts this with how God blessed “the unions which men and women naturally (*kata physin*) make for begetting children, but abominated and extinguished this unnatural and forbidden intercourse, and those who lusted for such he cast forth and chastised with punishments” (*De Abr.* 133-44). Pederasty is also especially singled out by Philo (*De spec. leg.* 3.37-42) as “an unnatural pleasure” (*ten para physin hedonen*).

All of this is of direct relevance to the exegesis of Rom. 1.18-32 where Paul uses precisely this same sort of language to critique same-sex sexual expression

¹⁰ See the discussion in R.B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, pp. 404-05.

whether by men or women. There is no evidence at all that Paul is simply critiquing pederasty in this text, not least because women were not accused of such behavior. Rom. 1.18-32 is critiquing any sort of same-sex sexual activity, and as was often the case in Jewish critiques of pagan behavior, linking sexual immorality with idolatry, something we will also find in the discussion of Acts 15 below.

Here will be a good place to deal with the use of certain key terms Paul or the Pauline writer uses elsewhere in the critique of same sex sexual behavior. Let us start with the term **arsenokoites** (1 Tim. 1.10), which refers literally to a male copulator, someone who beds a male. While there has been some speculation that this is a term Paul coined, this is unlikely in light of Sib. Or. 2.73 and *Greek Anthology* 9.686. In older commentaries this term was sometimes translated ‘sodomite’ because it was assumed that that was the sin of Sodom in Gen. 19.

It is clear enough from the detailed study of L.T. Johnson and of J.D. Quinn and W.C. Wacker that this particular term, while it can refer to pederasty, is not a technical term for pederasty and is also used of sexual relationships between consenting adults.¹¹ Paul is quite consistent with the general critique of same-sex sexual activity that we find not only in the OT but in other early Jewish literature. In no case was pederasty the only sin that was being critiqued. Furthermore, we don’t see any trajectory of change from what the OT says about the matter in Leviticus to what the NT says about this matter.

The term **arsenokoitai** also appears in Paul’s critique of sexual sins in 1 Cor. 6.9-10, this time coupled with the term **malakoi** which literally means ‘the soft ones’ and likely refers to effeminate males who play the sexual role of females in a same-sex sexual encounter. I say this because the term is placed in between the Greek word for a male copulator and the term for an adulterer. In other words, **malakoi** here is not just a critique of men who act in effeminate ways generally but

¹¹ See L.T. Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, (N.Y.: Doubleday, 2001), p. 170; J.D. Quinn and W.C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 88, 100-101. My own treatment of the subject can be found in Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians, Vol. One* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), pp. 197-98.

is part of a list of critiques of sinful *sexual activity*.¹² Philo for example uses this very term **malakoi** to refer to the passive partner in a homosexual sex act (*De spec. Leg.* 3.37-42). Philo uses this term again to describe some of the men of Sodom (*Abr.* 135-37). Sometimes the argument has been made that Philo and Paul are just critiquing exploitive sexual relationships but as Robert Gagnon says, this is ignoring that these two Jewish writers saw same-sex sexual relations as inherently exploitive, not just under certain conditions.¹³ Gagnon is also right to point out that the critique of lesbianism in the very same terms as homosexuality is noteworthy because lesbians were not accused of being pederasts. In other words, this parallelism in the critique makes it entirely unlikely that Paul is just critiquing pederasty in Romans 1.

Of late, Acts 15 has also been used, in effect to neutralize what is said in some of the texts discussed above. The argument goes that the early church was codifying a process of 'think and let think' involving the endorsing of multiple practices even when it came to essential issues of ethical practice. This can only be called a classic example of misusing a Biblical text to justify an all too modern agenda.

In the first place, what is at issue in Acts 15 is whether Gentiles need to be circumcised and keep the whole Mosaic covenant if they are to be saved as Jewish Christians are. The issue is not the codification or endorsement of various kinds of sexual practices. Indeed, the Decree issued by James quite specifically warns Gentiles that they are not to be guilty of **porneia**!

What then constitutes **porneia**? In a general list of this sort it probably does not have the specific sense of having sex with a prostitute, or incestuous sex, which in some contexts the term can mean, but rather it is probable that it has its normal more general sense--- any and all kinds of sexual immorality. In short, Gentiles are

¹² Notice the recent, accurate translations of these texts in the Common English Bible—the terms in 1 Cor 6:9 are rendered as "both participants in same-sex intercourse," or "submissive and dominant male sexual partners." Similarly, 1 Tim 1:10 the CEV has "people who have intercourse with the same sex".

¹³ R. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, (Abingdon, 2001), p. 311. Note that Gagnon deals in detail with various other uses of these terms in Greek literature (see pp. 307-39) and convincingly shows it is used again and again to critique homosexual intercourse.

to avoid idolatry and sexual immorality (see the similar connection of the two in both Rom. 1.18-32 and also in Rev. 2.14, and 2.20).

I have demonstrated at some length elsewhere that the term **eidolothuton**, which crops up in these kinds of texts and also especially in texts like 1 Cor. 8-10 where Paul is discussing what goes on in pagan temples and in their dinner parties, refers quite specifically to meat sacrificed to idols, and *eaten in the presence of idols in temple dining rooms*. Immorality in that context could involve sexual dalliance with the serving girls or men who served at the dinner party.

The issue in the decree of James then is not primarily menu, but venue. One has to ask where one would find all four of those items together in the same place, and the answer is in pagan temples.¹⁴ Whatever we may think of the four items in the Decree of James, one thing is clear--- James is not endorsing the idea that we could take a variety of views on same-sex sexual expression and still be the body of Christ united, at least when it comes to sexual ethics. Indeed, the prohibition of **porneia** in the decree, which likely means all sorts of sexual immorality including same-sex practices, drives us in just the opposite direction. This is not a matter that the church can simply agree to disagree on.

Perhaps a more common fallacy that we run across in the same-sex intercourse and marriage discussions is the assumption that it is now a *proven scientific fact* that people are 'born gay'. In fact, the scientific jury is still out on that matter.¹⁵ I am not a scientist but I take seriously what good scientists like Francis Collins, the head of the human genome project for the N.I.H., and others, say on the matter. *So far*, there has been no discovery of a 'gay' gene. So far, the study of zygote twins, one of whom chooses a gay lifestyle the other of whom chooses a heterosexual lifestyle, also does not really support such a claim. Here I would refer you to the more than ample data amassed by Dr. Robert Gagnon on his website--- www.robagnon.net.

¹⁴ See my discussion at length in *What's in a Word?* (Waco: Baylor Press, 2009), pp. 89-111 where one will find a detailed study on both 'idol food' and **porneia**.

¹⁵ The data is reviewed at length in Rob Gagnon's book mentioned in a previous note, and can be seen in great detail on his website as well--- www.robagnon.net.

As for Francis Collins, here is an important quote:

"An area of particularly strong public interest is the genetic basis of homosexuality. Evidence from twin studies does in fact support the conclusion that heritable factors play a role in male homosexuality. However, the likelihood that the identical twin of a homosexual male will also be gay is about 20% (compared with 2-4 percent of males in the general population), indicating that sexual orientation is genetically influenced but not hardwired by DNA, and that whatever genes are involved represent predispositions, not predeterminations."¹⁶

He has further qualified this more recently by saying *as of yet* no gay gene has yet been found, but there may be such a discovery in the future.

So what should we make of this statement by Collins? He concludes that there may be certain tendencies or dispositions or inclinations in some persons from birth that lead to same-sex attraction. Fair enough. But what Collins adds is just as important-- "sexual orientation is genetically influenced *but not hardwired* by DNA, and that whatever genes are involved represent predispositions, not predeterminations". In other words..... we have a choice about our sexual behavior. We are not predetermined from birth to *behave* in a certain way.

But for the sake of argument let's assume some persons do have such 'gay' inclinations or predispositions from birth. Why exactly would we see this as necessarily a good thing? After all there are such things as birth defects, bad genetics, and so on. Why should we assume that simply because one is 'born that way' that therefore 'God made me this way' and that thus necessarily this must be declared to be good? If we look at this from a strictly evolutionary point of view, any species that develops tendencies towards relationships with other members of the same species that cannot result in the propagation of that species is a dead end. It is a non-productive activity vis-a-vis the survival of the species, a form of self-

¹⁶ This is found in the Appendix to his book *The Language of God*, (N.Y. Free Press, 2007), p. 260.

defeating behavior. Why exactly this is hardly ever a part of the conversation is hard to fathom.

This whole line of thought ('that I was born this way and so this must be good') totally and completely ignores a crucial Christian concept—namely human fallenness. Not everything in its present condition is good. And when it comes to human beings, here is the truth according to Scripture---- “all have sinned and fallen short (or lack) God’s glory” (Rom. 3.23). The Biblical message about our human condition is that we are all in our present condition sinners, and as such we have a rather infinite capacity for rationalizing our bad behavior. Self-justification in fact has become an art form in our overly sexualized and narcissistic culture.

In short, there is neither a clear scientific nor a Biblical basis for saying ‘because someone is born that way, that is necessarily a good thing and must be endorsed or celebrated’. Not so. And I would reiterate the point that ‘predispositions are not the same thing as predeterminations’.

In fact, as Collins and others also say, there are a bevy of factors which contribute to a person’s sexual behavior, some having to do with *nature*, and some definitely having to do with *nurture*, environment, education, friendships and so on. In any case, it is not true that a person is hard-wired and cannot help behaving in this way or that, when it comes to sexual expression. David Greenberg, a sociologist at NYU has contended that homosexual identity is *largely* if not wholly socially constructed. He points out that the notion of homosexual *orientation* as a lifelong innate characteristic of some individuals is a truly modern concept. Indeed, ‘sexual orientation’ as a phrase arose in this discussion within my own lifetime.¹⁷

The issue in any case in the Bible is not ‘sexual orientation’ or even sexual inclinations. The issue in the Bible is sexual *behavior*. Period. The assumption throughout the NT is that by the grace of God and the help of the Holy Spirit we have control over our behavior. When we cease to believe that fact, we have given up the

¹⁷ D. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1989).

whole notion that grace and the Spirit of God can enable us to behave in good and godly ways.

Another specious argument that we often hear mentioned in discussions of the issue of gay marriage or gay sexual behavior is the notion that this issue is on the same ethical footing as racial prejudice. It certainly is *not*. There can be no analogy between prejudice against a person because of their ethnic origins (e.g. anti-Semitism) or their skin color (various sorts of racism), and a criticism of the sexual behavior of the gay and lesbian community. The former has to do with some inherent traits of being, the latter has to do with *behavior*.

Dr. Joy Moore, an African American scholar at Fuller Seminary¹⁸ puts the matter this way:

The effort to change [sexual] moral definitions misinterprets the struggle of past human rights movements. Past coalitions sought to restore full humanity to persons of non-European descent (then viewed as less than human) a century after the elimination of the institution of slavery in America. They requested not to *change* ethical standards, but to *practice them....* Today's arguments related to same-sex union seek to redefine institutions and change moral categories...Revising moral standards changes the very ethics that call into question judging a person by birth rather than by behavior. Persons of non-European descent have requested they not be assumed incapable of behaving within the moral and cultural standards of society. Advocates for homosexual practice appeal for a change in cultural mores that will accept certain behaviors traditionally deemed immoral. The former seeks to be allowed to behave within existing ethics, the latter seeks identification by practices presently outside of cultural standards. This is a very different request for rights.¹⁹

In other words, in the former case the appeal was for the culture to *live into* a Christian ethic. In the latter case, the appeal is to get *beyond* a Biblical and Christian ethic. Obviously, it is a Biblical truism that God loves us all, but what God does not love is sinful behavior by any of us, and neither should we endorse or encourage such behavior. Such behavior simply alienates us from God, which is precisely why God is not pleased with it. And I might add, Jesus is an equal opportunity critiquer of sexual sin by heterosexuals, as well as by others.

¹⁸ J. J. Moore, "Contentious Conversations: Myths in the Homosexual Debate," in *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church's Position on Homosexuality*, ed. M. D. Dunnam and H. N. Maloney (Abingdon Press, 2003), pp. 115-21.

¹⁹ Moore, p. 118.

The fact that we should not single out 'gay' sin for some sort of special condemnation is a good and proper insight. All sin however, committed by whomever, should be called to account. We are obviously called to love the sinner but not their sin, whether in this case we are talking about heterosexual or homosexual sinful sexual behavior. The almost total inability to understand the difference between a critique of someone's behavior and a personal or *ad hominem* attack on someone's very being, has led to all sorts of faulty logic.

The most basic response to such bad logic is that we are *not* simply what we do! We are all beings of sacred worth created in the image of God, and loved by God, but we are also all fallen human beings in need of redemption by God. Who we are is one thing, what we do is another. A critique of same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage is a critique of behavior. It is not a justice issue, as racism is. It is a sexual ethics issue. There is a big difference between mere prejudice and having moral principles about sexual behavior.

Sometimes in this context we also hear Jesus himself quoted "judge not lest ye be judged". Of course this is the same Jesus who made also sorts of moral critiques of sexual misbehavior, spiritual elitism, hypocrisy, and a host of other sins. What Jesus did *not* mean by 'judge not' is "you ought never to correct a brother or sister, since of course you too are a sinner".

In context, what Jesus says in Mt. 7.1-5 is that one must first and foremost attend to one's own sins, one's own blind spots. Of course this is true. We must be far more self-critical than critical of others. But the exhortations in Scripture about warning others against sin and caring enough to confront such sin are too numerous to ignore. The alternative to hypocritically castigating others while ignoring one's own sins and blind spots is not silence in the face of sin, but a life of integrity, calling one's self, as well as one's fellow believers to live more holy lives, lives that please God, whether or not they please other human beings or not.

We would do well to remember that the ethic of Jesus is a community ethic, and it expects the community to uphold the ethic collectively, together, calling one another to account. Sexual behavior is not a private matter, though it is a deeply personal matter. Since most sexual behavior is inter-personal in nature obviously

the community of faith has a right to have standards in place since what one person does affects especially the immediate faith community of which that person is a part.

III. What about Gay Marriage?

If even some of the arguments presented above are cogent when it comes to the issue of same-sex sexual activity being always a violation of Biblical ethics, then the issues of gay marriage becomes a moot point. Nevertheless, it is important to this discussion that we discuss what the teaching of Jesus was about marriage and singleness, as one sometimes hears the claim that Jesus says nothing against same-sex sexual activity. This is in fact false if we take into consideration indirect evidence. We need to consider Mt. 19.3-12. First of all here is the text-----

³ Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" ⁴ "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' ⁵ and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." ⁷ "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" ⁸ Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. ⁹ I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery." ¹⁰ The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry." ¹¹ Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. ¹² For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."

Jesus is talking about exactly two options: 1) fidelity in marriage defined clearly as heterosexual monogamy (notice the clear reference to God creating us male and female); 2) being a eunuch. Now **eunochoi** in antiquity were most certainly not gay or lesbian persons. They were persons who: 1) either had a birth defect in regard to their genitals, 2) were castrated by others, or 3) even made themselves eunuchs by self-castration. In other words we are dealing *not with*

people who engaged in non-heterosexual sexual activity, we are dealing with people who had been incapacitated from engaging in normal sexual activity!

Mt. 19.12 has been seized on by the gay community because it refers to people who were 'born that way'. Unfortunately, they ignore altogether the rest of what Jesus says in that verse—namely that some **eunochoi** have been *made that way by others or even by themselves!* All the gay and lesbian persons I know would be very upset with the notion that somebody else made them gay, or that they *made* themselves gay. To the contrary, their argument is that they've always been this way, since birth.

The background here is of course the pronouncement in Is. 56.3-5---“do not let the eunuch say, I am just a dry tree, for thus says the Lord, to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me, and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters: I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” This passage reveals exactly how the Biblical writer viewed the eunuch--- a person whose genital incapacity made him a 'dry tree', unable to engage in the sexual activity that could produce offspring. Since children were viewed as the ancient form of name preservation, here the eunuch is assured that while his ability to engage in sexual practices that produce offspring has been 'cut off', his name will endure in the house of God.

This exegesis makes perfectly clear that Jesus is not talking about gays or lesbians when he refers to **eunochoi**, nor is he an advocate for gay marriage at all. Marriage is only under discussion when Jesus refers to heterosexual monogamy. It is not under discussion when he refers to being eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom.

In fact, not only is Jesus *not* enunciating a more broad definition of marriage and divorce here, he is in fact suggesting a more *restrictive* view than was current in early Judaism, which is precisely why his disciples protest--- “if that is the way it is between a man and a woman, it's better not to marry.” Notice as well where that retort comes--- just before Jesus' comment on being eunuchs. Jesus is saying “if you can't handle a Biblical marriage, then you should remain single and chaste (like eunuchs), for the sake of the kingdom”. In other words, the traditional exegesis of

this whole passage is right---- Jesus defines marriages as heterosexual monogamy and the only alternative he allows is celibacy in singleness. Period.

IV. Does Gender Matter?

Surprisingly, one of the issues which seldom comes up in the discussion of same-sex sexual activity or even in the discussion of gay marriage is whether gender matters or should matter when it comes to human relationships, human well-being, or the continued existence of the human race. On the surface it would seem that the answer to this question should be obvious. Even in an age of much sexual confusion it can hardly be denied that it takes both males and females, or at the very least the sperm of males and the eggs of females, to produce another human being. This being the case, maleness and femaleness, gender difference, is a necessity for the survival of the human race.

Furthermore, and as a result of this previous fact only males can be husbands and fathers and only females can be wives and mothers. Even while some roles can be assumed by either a male or female in a marriage, it is not the case that all such roles are interchangeable. To give but two examples, only women can bear children and only women can breast-feed their offspring. End of story. This should have told us something important--- namely *gender matters* when it comes to the roles of mother or father. And furthermore, *under normal circumstances*, a child needs to have a relationship with both a mother and a father if humanly possible. Single parent parenting, while sometimes a necessity is never really ideal or a virtue. There is the whole issue of modeling what it looks like to be a man or a woman, a father or a mother for one's children.

None of this should surprise us when we study the creation stories in Genesis 1-2. In those texts we hear not only that God deliberately created humankind as 'male and female' in God's image. We also hear that God gave them a mandate to 'be fruitful and multiply' something the coupling of two males or two females can never accomplish. In these same chapters we hear that 'it is not good for the man to be alone' and therefore God creates a person for Adam who is a suitable companion—namely a woman. This whole creation theology is what leads to the notion of a 'one-

flesh union' so important to the teaching of Jesus about marriage. Only a man and a woman can share a one-flesh union. The one-flesh union concept presupposes the notion that originally the woman was taken out of the man's flesh. Both in terms of origin and in terms of function as created in God's image, maleness and femaleness matter if one is going to fulfill the creation order mandate.

If, in the end, gender does matter to our identity, is an integral part of our identity, and if gender determines at least some of the roles we are able to play (and it does), and some that we ought to play, then it ought also to be the case that at least *in some respects* gender should determine how we ought to behave when it comes to other members of our own sex or the opposite sex, *especially if the issue is sexual expression, especially since the sexual organs are gender specific.*

Gender identity, gender roles, and gender behavior are such inter-related matters according to the Bible, that we should expect that various of the exhortations, warnings and commandments about gender conduct are grounded in the basic presupposition that gender is an *essential* part of our identity and of the roles we ought to play in society, especially the sexual roles we can and ought play in relationship to other human beings.

V. What Role Should the Bible Play in our Sexual Ethical Discussions?

In his helpful discussion of homosexuality, Richard Hays reminds us that "the gospel is not merely a moral or philosophical teaching that hearers may accept or reject as they choose; it is rather the eschatological instrument through which God is working his purpose out in the world."²⁰ Nor can we say that the Bible is some sort of scientific textbook given in a pre-scientific era that helps us sort out all the complexities of human identity.

What the Bible, and more particularly the Gospel, is however, is God's Word used to transform us into new creatures, capable by God's grace and Spirit of new conduct, holy conduct, capable of overcoming sinful inclinations and temptations

²⁰ Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 384.

that beset us all (see 1 Cor. 10. 13). The Bible is equally insistent that the image of God in us involves both male and female, and that gender identity is a guide to how we ought to behave in regard to both members of our own sex, and of the opposite sex. It is for this reason that after surveying all the Biblical texts in both the OT and NT that refer to same-sex sexual activity, Hays concludes “the Biblical witness against homosexual practice is univocal.”²¹ There are not a variety of views offered in the Bible on the matter, there is only one view offered. The question becomes whether we will obey the teaching of the Bible on this matter or not.

Finally, sometimes this whole discussion is couched in terms of the issue of hospitality. The NT word for hospitality is in fact **xenophilia**. The ‘love of foreigners’ or strangers is its literal sense. The church it is argued should be welcoming to all persons, regardless of their sexual orientation, regardless of their past sins. The church is after all, a hospital for sick sinners, not a museum for saints. In fact, *I agree with this---* we should be welcoming to all persons, just as Jesus was. Indeed, we are to love all persons, even our enemies.

All are welcome to come to Christ as they are, but there is a corollary to this-- none, since we all are sinners, are welcome to stay as they are. Welcoming is one thing, *affirming one's pre-existing sexual choices and behaviors is entirely another*. It is no part of love to condemn the sinner. It is also no part of love to condone, or even baptize and call good, the sin. Thus in regard to many ethical issues, not just sexual ethical issues, we must be welcoming *but not affirming*. The Bible is an equal opportunity critiquer of all sorts of sin, just as Jesus was. Notice how the critique of same-sex sexual activity sometimes comes in the midst of a vice list which includes other sins such as stealing, murder and so on (see 1 Cor. 6.9-10). In other words, while same-sex sexual activity is not singled out for special criticism, it is grouped together with other serious sins as potentially keeping someone out of the Kingdom of God if it is insisted on and persisted in.

But it is *wrong* to place the emphasis on the condemnation of sin, even when it comes to sexual misbehavior. As John 3.16-17 reminds us God loves the whole

²¹ Hays, p. 389.

world, even though God does not love our sinful ways (since they separate us from God and his love), and he did not send his Son into the world condemn the world, but to redeem it. All of God's children regardless of their faults or flaws, regardless of their inclinations or temptations, regardless of their natures or their nurture need to change. Love itself is the change agent. When we stop believing God's love and grace can change human character and behavior, we have stopped believing in the Gospel. As for me, I trust that God knows me better than I know myself, and that God's Word is truthful and trustworthy even when it comes to as difficult a matter as our sexual ethics.
