

A Biblical Argument for the Acceptance of Homosexuality by the Christian Church

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Abstract:

Debates in the church about homosexuality are seldom constructive and often repetitive; thus, a new approach is necessary. These debates have not been deeply grounded in the Bible and a religious organization making a religious decision should base their decision in their sacred texts. To decide what the Bible requires of us, we have to agree on how to read the Bible. Popular assumptions about how to read the Bible do not square with the contents of the Bible itself. An examination of the hermeneutical issues debated during the Protestant Reformation gives us a more solid foundation for reading the Bible. Deciding about homosexuality is, in effect, deciding about sin. Assessing how the Bible defines sin shows us that we should look for behavior that show a love of God and neighbor and understand that limits on our passions are needed to stop abuse of the neighbor. With this definition, and examining the lives of homosexuals, we can see that homosexuality, in and of itself, does not meet the Bible's definition of sin.

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1. Introduction

A. The current debate on homosexuality is not working

The church's debates over homosexuality are typically not very productive or edifying.¹ Advocates and opponents too often "talk past" each other and too often everyone often winds up angrier than when they began. "Liberals can make conservatives look dumb, and conservatives can make liberals look shallow," writes one commentator.² Bitterness and threats of church division often are the only outcome of publicly considering this issue.

Despite this history, churches seem unable to try anything different, and the same arguments get repeated, with the same unhelpful result. Why does the debate not make any progress? The debate in the churches has usually been a debate using special pleading rather than universal principles, using secular arguments rather than religious ones and using fundamentalist religious arguments rather than more orthodox religious arguments. These arguments have failed to be persuasive. Worse, since these types of arguments are not part of the best of the church's tradition, it contributes to the slow process by which the institution of the church surrenders its theological and scriptural heritage and becomes (if liberal) a sort of nearly-secular place where "good things" are done, or (if conservative) a rigid place, narrow, moralistic and unforgiving.

A new beginning comes from the realization that the church's real tradition has not been employed in the debate about homosexuality: while the debate appears to have been an argument over the Bible, in fact, the Bible has seldom been used in any deep way consistent with its profound nature. That is the key to breaking open the frozen categories of the homosexuality debate. If we take seriously the Bible and how we should understand the Bible this will result in a more productive way for the church to decide this question that dissolves many of the dilemmas Christians find themselves in now. We will find that scripture calls us to change the church's opinion about homosexuality. This document presents my argument for doing so.

B. A new argument – in one page

In this section I give the outline of my argument. The rest of the document presents the evidence to support this argument.

First of all, we do need an argument for accepting homosexuality. It is a question of church policy, not just a question of each person deciding for themselves.

¹ The United Presbyterian Church, USA has several times been consumed with the question, starting in the late 70's. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America had its first modern debate on the subject in the late 80's and early 90's, and the Anglican Church is facing the question in 2003. None of these debated ended peaceably. Documents produced by these debates are discussed by Fulkerson, "Church Documents."

² Rogers, *Christian Body*, at p. 19. See his analysis of how each side misreads the other at pp. 19-27.

We need a biblical argument for accepting homosexuality. A religious organization attempting to decide what God wants should use religious arguments, especially using the sacred texts of the religion. Not to use religious arguments is to say that we are not really a religious organization.

In order to use our sacred texts, an analysis of how we interpret the Bible must be done first. The debate over homosexuality has failed to think about what is an effective argument from the Bible.

Examining the methods of Biblical interpretation used by proponents and opponents reveals serious flaws in their arguments. The theories used by opponents of homosexuality (typically biblical inerrancy, the Bible as a book of laws) are internally inconsistent, impossible to apply and not what the Biblical text itself suggests. The proponents of accepting homosexuality typically try to use different proof-texts or try to use criteria from outside the Bible to justify their position. This is also not effective.

Looking at the methods of biblical interpretation used in the Protestant Reformation permits a new beginning on a more solid foundation. During the Reformation considerable attention was given to understanding in what way scripture can function as an authority for the church. The Reformation developed an approach to the Bible that is faithful to the form and content of scripture. This approach affirms the centrality of scripture. This approach invites the faithful to reason together about scripture and to pay attention to how scripture approaches issues, not just to consider a few selected verses ripped out of context. This approach encourages us to let “scripture interpret scripture.” It enables us to identify biblical ways of deciding among conflicting texts.

Putting the debate in religious terms, we ask “Is homosexuality a sin?” With this perspective, we can consider all of scripture and study how the Bible defines what sin is. This investigation reveals principles that when applied, show that homosexuality per se is not a sin, in the Biblical meaning of sin.

Thus, the church, in being faithful to scripture, should reverse its position of total opposition to homosexuality.

C. To the reader: an invitation and a challenge

Homosexuality is a topic that produces strong emotions. Experience in discussing the issue with people suggests that I should respectfully, but explicitly, both welcome and challenge you, my readers.

To readers, especially those not professionally trained in theology or the Bible, I want to extend a welcome and an **invitation** to work through this argument. I have found that people are reluctant to venture into a serious analysis of this topic, fearing they don't have the technical background to participate and concerned that the analysis of the Bible will prove to be “over their heads.”

That should not be the case. It was one of the objectives of Martin Luther to restore the Bible and the study of it to rank and file members of the church; a worthy task in my view. I try not to assume any technical knowledge. I try to explain each point along the way. Of course, being fallible, and given the diversity of people who might be reading this paper will mean that I don't always succeed. However, there is never any reason for you to feel afraid, intimidated or overwhelmed. A person of ordinary intelligence, who has no special Biblical knowledge, but is intellectually curious and willing to invest time in the topic, is who I intend to write for.

But I must also extend a **challenge** to the reader. This is not the standard way of approaching the topic; readers need to understand that from the beginning. I think I am not overbearing in asking you to read what I've written and deal with it on its own terms, for good or ill. Too often, people come to a new work on homosexuality only looking to see if it says what they already like to say themselves. My goal here is to find a new way of assessing the issue, one that is not dependent on existing categories.

To liberals, I ask you to take seriously the scriptural basis of my argument. Liberals, too often worn down by the capture of the Bible by fundamentalism, assume that one must "go beyond" scripture to achieve justice or liberation. I am arguing here that scripture, when taken seriously, requires this liberating decision.

To conservatives, I ask you to take seriously the commitment to the entire Bible and to the many ways it reveals its truth to us. Conservatives, too often offended by the way scripture is dismissed, cling loudly to three or four verses. I am arguing here that the entire Bible applies to the decision about homosexuality. Conservatives also tend to be worried about the general decline in morality in society, to them I ask that you notice that this argument for homosexuality takes seriously the God-given imperative to act morally.

Also, those who are professionally trained do sometimes object to discussion of their specialized subjects by the ordinary people, feeling that only people with some designated authority or credential should lead or control the discussion. There is no worse critique of a scientist or other professional than to accuse him or her of being "popular." I would ask the professionals to understand that the decision on homosexuality belongs to the church, and as such, the members of the church need to be equipped to decide it. Writing clearly and simply is a subtle and quite technical art, worthy of the best efforts of the learned.

Finally, there also objections raised against the length of this document and the number of subjects it discusses that are not normally covered in the traditional debate over homosexuality. However, I think that such a lengthy process is in fact the shortest way to actually resolving the church's question on homosexuality (as opposed to "solving" the problem by the majority silencing the minority or by sending the issue underground). So many false justifications are offered on the issue, so much assuming of the conclusions, that it is necessary to back up a long way and address a host of questions that do not appear to be immediately relevant. For 2,000 years almost all of the Christian church as held one official position about homosexuality. I don't think we should expect a change to come from a five page pamphlet with colorful graphics.

I should also give a word of explanation about terms. I refer to “homosexuals” or “gays.” Of course any person has many aspects to their personality, but using such terms are simply a convenient short hand against the tedious practice of writing “persons whose primary sexual expression is homosexual.” The distinction between “homosexual behavior” and “homosexual orientation” is often used to try to find a compromise position, as will be discussed below, I do not find this distinction useful. So I refer to “homosexuals” without distinction as to whether their behavior is external or only in their hearts. Similarly, I hope it will be understood that terms like “proponents” and “opponents” are used for convenience, and it is known that people have complex opinions on many aspects of the case.

D. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank those from the Ecunet discussion group, created by Wyn Martello, who have made suggestions and pointed out flaws. The many who have written carefully about the Bible and who have been my teachers also deserve all the praise I can give them. I also sincerely want to thank those I have disagreed with, for each has pushed me to be clearer and consider more aspects of this issue. Several homosexual acquaintances and friends have provided food for thought both by their words and by my being able to watch their lives in the church unfold.

It is common for authors to say that “all errors remain the responsibility of the author,” granting a plenary indulgence to all those who may have sinned by contact with the writer. For such a controversial subject, this must be a particularly sincere wish. I do not know the opinions on homosexuality of many of the writers I quote; I assume that many would disagree with the conclusions of this work.

2. The need for a authoritative biblical justification

A. The need for a *justification*

Do we need a justification for accepting homosexuality – a formal “case” or argument that occurs in public and leads to a decision that most will accept? Not everyone thinks so. Gay people and those who advocate for them are often not willing to give the debate authority. Any person who has worked through the question of homosexuality at a personal level finds it very agonizing to have others debate this question. To them, this is a question of personal survival and are offended by others debating the issue in some detached and theoretical way. “I don’t care what you decide,” or, “who are you to judge me” are typical expressions of this.

While the anxiety of homosexuals about the debate should be understood, the idea that this is a personal question only must be rejected. If gays and their supporters - as a precondition to engaging in debate - announce that will not be bound by the outcome of the debate, then it is hard to understand why those opposed to gays need let the debate bind them either. If the question is simply a personal issue of self-expression, then why is it not an issue of self-expression for those who hate gays? The church is more than a collection of individuals, each entitled to their own opinion. The issue is not just for you or your friends to decide what “is right for you” about this issue. The church, as a group, is making a decision about what to say to homosexuals, how to preach about the issue and who to allow to be its pastors and members.

Likewise, homosexuals cannot be automatically be given the status of an authority or expert on the subject of being homosexual. While living an issue does teach you about it, deep expertise also requires reflection on an experience, to study what others have discovered and to go beyond the accidents of your own personal story. The question is what the church should do. If we are to ask the institution to change its policy, then we will have to have arguments that carry weight with a majority of the institution’s members. An institution will not change its opinion on the basis of the authority of the very people it rejects.

Even if we think we (proponents) have fully justified our own position, spending years discussing this including witnessing to family, neighbors and parishioners, we should appreciate that many are not in that position. It remains true that many or even most Christians haven't even begun to think critically about homosexuality. Many have resolved the issue by adopting uncritically some principle that they have never examined. Many Christians are coming to grips with the issue for the first time.

It’s easy for those who have been debating this issue for some time to be irritated with those who haven’t and think them slow or unenlightened. The first draft of the ELCA social statement on sexuality³ made this mistake, with a patronizing tone to those less enlightened than the authors and suggesting that a justification was not needed so much as a prophetic call to action.

³ Division for Church in Society, “The Church and Human Sexuality: A Lutheran Perspective,” First Draft, October 1993.

It is also the case that opponents of homosexuality will be reluctant to think that any sort of inquiry into the issue is needed. No justification needs to be constructed because, to them, the matter is closed, decided already and the only battle is over enforcement of what they call “the church’s historic teaching.” The question to them is one of obvious revelation, and so there is nothing to debate.

However, without a public debate where arguments are made and assessed, all that is left is, on the one hand, power and on the other, individual sentiment. Keeping this decision in the church, but without a commitment to a debate, what we have left is politics with the sides fighting for votes and power, not a Christian decision of the whole church. The decision can be taken outside the church and become privatized, but that effectively means the end of the church as a community that supports its members with their moral decisions.

These reasons argue that there must be a real debate, with something in common and something at risk on both sides. Each side must enter in with a conviction that what they discover in scripture and by reason will be persuasive with them.

We need a formal, public justification for advocating that the church change its position on homosexuality.

B. The need for a *biblical* justification

For a religious body to decide what God desires its members to do, an analysis of the religion’s sacred texts is essential. This statement may seem obvious, even banal. However, there are many who object to it, rejecting the value of scripture, either overtly or by implication. These are mostly proponents of change, but even opponents can reject the need for the Bible to be central to the debate.

Rejecting the Bible as “old-fashioned,” or morally out of date.

Some reject the scripture as authoritative because they believe they have risen above the ancient limitations of the Bible. In a discussion of the new CEV translation, some of its supporters⁴ mentioned in an approving way that the new translation removes certain imperfections in the original text. This is a small example of an attitude that assumes the ability to judge scripture. If one can judge scripture and change the text of scripture, then no biblical justification of homosexuality is necessary. Those who feel this way regard the various homosexual proof texts as aberrations, relics of primitive, pre-scientific society. Coming to that conclusion terminates the need to develop a biblical argument.

⁴ See issues of *Bible Review* for October 1996, p. 42-43, Feb. 97, p. 5 and April 97, p. 8. In addition to struggling how to overcome the "anti-Semitism" produced by reading the Bible, readers also debated what to do with the "sordid, narrowly moralistic, prejudiced and immoral teaching" found in the Bible.

However, it can be hard to separate “up-to-date” from “trendy.” If you look at the “modern, up-to-date” books on social issues from even 20 or 30 years ago, they are often embarrassingly out of date. This is certainly true of books dealing with human sexuality whose pronouncements about what is acceptable or healthy seem quaint or absurd today.

The issue of the role of science in this debate is discussed more in a following section.

Rejecting theology in favor of the personal.

Some reject scripture as having authority because they feel that the personal is more important than the theological. Many debates about homosexuality effectively ignore the Bible and religious analysis, despite seeming to refer to it. Discussions about homosexuality can recount personal experience, tell stories of gay awakening, be self-conscious about the “struggle” and yet never focus deeply on questions of the Bible and its interpretation.⁵

In some cases, this is defended by people who are in the church and even by pastors and others in positions of religious leadership in the church.⁶ Many believe that a focus on theology or on the Bible is just “head learning” or “dry” or “rationalization.” They believe that it is only by hearing the story of a homosexual and encountering them as a person that change happens. No one will be argued into acceptance, they contend.

There is no doubt that change does happen this way, and no doubt that little change has resulted from years of debate. However, this rejection of the use of scripture is a fatal error. Is the Christian church a religion, or is it not? That is not as silly a question as it might sound. If the church is intended to be the home of a religion, then how can we dismiss both religious reasons and sacred texts as the foundation for how we decide what to do? The argument will be made that the transforming encounter with a religious homosexual is a living out of religious issues. If so, then the religious texts should be relevant to help us promote those encounters, help us approach them in the right way and help shape our understanding of them. Near the end of this paper, I hope to show how that would be possible.

Rejecting the Bible in favor of theology.

Opponents of change sometimes base their reasons less on biblical texts than on theological categories such as (in the Lutheran tradition) “Law and Gospel.” This will be assessed more fully in a later chapter. While these categories should be derived from the Bible, there is always the temptation for them to become detached from the Bible.

Rejecting the Bible in favor of common sense.

⁵ An example is Wink, *Homosexuality*.

⁶ Indeed, some of the most bitter criticism (and most condescending) that I have received for this work has come from advocates for homosexuals who regard any use of the Bible as an authority to be hopelessly reactionary.

The Bible is more widely admired than it is studied or used. This leads to arguments that appear to be based on the Bible, but really use it as an ornament. An example is provided by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's 1996 document on sexuality, *Common Convictions*. While not addressing homosexuality directly, the document does address a host of issues about sexuality. The Bible is certainly referenced, and often, but the conclusions seem to be based more on "common sense" about life than analysis of the text. "In Scripture we read that God created humankind male and female and '... behold it was very good.' (Gen. 1:27, 31) Sexuality is a mysterious, life-long aspect of human relationships. Through sexuality, human beings can experience profound joy, purpose, and unity, as well as deep pain, frustration, and division."⁷

One cannot disagree with any of this, except to note that the conclusion has little connection to the beginning: the verses cited do not speak directly of sexuality, its mysterious nature or its possibilities for joy and suffering.

Rejecting the Bible

"The erosion of scriptural authority has been constant since the Reformation, and especially, the Enlightenment."⁸ So begins Robin Scroggs' review of the matter, identifying a series of reasons why this has occurred, ranging over issues of the exact text, historical accuracy, ethics and theology. Perhaps we should add unintended effects of scholarly study itself. "The hegemony of modern criticism in the scholarly guilds of biblical interpretation tends to hold Scripture captive to an academic, rather than religious ends... these same interests ... transferred to the citadels of theological education with the unfortunate result of reproducing a clergy no longer interested in the formative intent of Scripture."⁹

In short, the problem is serious. It is no longer a question of trying to reform slightly how the authoritative Bible speaks to us on an issue, but rather to first even imagine that the Bible could have authority. At the same time, I would expect that many reading this document are totally unaware that there is any crisis of authority for the Bible.

The consequences of rejecting the Bible

There are serious consequences should we succeed in dealing with homosexuality while bypassing the Bible; what we gain by acquiring an easy solution to our problem of homosexuality, we lose many times over in eliminating the power of the Bible.

⁷ ELCA, *Common Convictions*, p. 1. The example cited is, I think, typical of the document.

⁸ Scroggs, "Foundational Document," p. 17

⁹ Wall, "Canonical Perspective," p. 530

This is not trivial. If we come to an acceptance of homosexuality as an individual by dodging a head-on struggle with scripture then we have left ourselves vulnerable to one of two problems. If we do still value the scripture, then we are vulnerable to guilt. In the back of our minds, sitting there is the knowledge we keep secret to even ourselves: that we're really made peace with this issue by ignoring the Bible. On the other hand, if we come to an acceptance of homosexuality by diminishing the Bible, then we have cut our selves off from its ability to sustain our lives, a prayer life or be a comfort in trouble. Neither alternative is desirable.

As a question of politics, I think it is only a biblical argument that will be effective with rank and file faithful. These people may not be able to articulate their concerns, but they can have an uneasy suspicion that what they are hearing uses the Bible as a cover, rather than as a center. Only a biblical argument of depth and power and one that is part and parcel of a history of interpretation will have the power to convince enough church member to change their opinion and vote for an acceptance of homosexuality. This is even more true if we wish for enough to change their mind for the change to be accepted peacefully.

Those of us who advocate for change cannot use sharp bureaucratic infighting, political influence or our education to spring this change on an unprepared laity. A 51% majority is not enough. The only approach with integrity is to look the rank and file of the church in the eye, acknowledge that we are proposing a significant change and ask time to explain why we think that reading the Bible with integrity demands that we change.

But it should also be said, that the most compelling reason for the need for scripture to be at the center of our discussion is simply the compelling nature of the Bible itself. The power of its insights, the range of its wisdom, the beauty and splendor of God that is revealed there, the way it can be understood by the simple yet cannot be exhausted by a lifetime's intense study, any person who has experienced this cannot keep silent while it is marginalized from an important issue.

If we really are a Christian church, then our views must be based in the sacred texts of the religion.

C. The need for an *authoritative* biblical justification

How is a biblical argument to be constructed? What is a good, solid, persuasive biblical argument? How do we decide if the arguments we are hearing are sound? I believe we cannot solve the question of homosexuality until we solve the question of how we should interpret the Bible. Thus we need to introduce the word "hermeneutics." This word means the science and method of how we interpret scripture. It is a common term for people who study the Bible professionally, but a word totally unknown to the general church. There are many different approaches to the subject, many "hermeneutics" of scripture. There are "feminist hermeneutics" that favor analysis of gender issues, "liberationist hermeneutics" that focus on political issues. There are "fundamentalist hermeneutics" that say the Bible is inerrant. There are dozens of

different approaches to scripture. You can write a history of the church just by assessing the various hermeneutics of scripture that have come and gone and returned.

That probably surprises many of you who have just thought that the Bible was the Bible. But, think of how much effort has gone into understanding the United States Constitution. What does “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech...” actually mean? People who interpret the Constitution bring different theories to their work. There are different “hermeneutics” held by “strict constructionists” and “judicial activists” among others. The US Constitution is only intended to describe what the government can and cannot do. The Bible is about the entire meaning of life, a much more complex issue! Further, the Constitution was written in our culture¹⁰ in the language we still speak. Neither is true for us reading the Bible in translation as it speaks of events from a distant time and place. Thus, in using the Bible to decide a question, we must pay attention to what our hermeneutic of scripture is.

The question of homosexuality in the church is first a question about biblical hermeneutics. Until we answer questions about inerrancy, scripture as law and what sin is as defined by the Bible, all our debates about homosexuality will flounder because we have no way to reach agreement.

Therefore, I think we must have a Biblical justification of homosexuality, and we have to study how best to do it.

¹⁰ This is true for citizens of the United States. Readers from other countries can, I suspect, find similar examples from their own cultures.

3. Why non-biblical arguments for accepting homosexuality fail

A. Introduction

Part of the justification for why we need a biblical argument for accepting homosexuality is made by showing that non-biblical arguments will not answer the question for a church. In this chapter we will consider the arguments most commonly offered in support of accepting homosexuality. Many of the justifications offered for homosexuality have little to do with religion at all, they are imported from secular debates. While these arguments are often presented in a way that imply they are biblical arguments, they really have nothing to do with the Bible. Not all of these arguments are used by the same people, the same movement, or at the same time. The following paragraphs name and assess various common arguments.

There have been some arguments that use Biblical texts to support homosexuality. These are also dealt with in this chapter.

B. Examples of false justifications

Using **psychology** or **social sciences** to judge religious questions.

These sciences are important in their own sphere and often valuable in providing context for religious questions, it is their use as a norm for religious questions that is a problem. An example of this type of argument is to dismiss the food laws of kosher found in Leviticus.¹¹ The argument is made that these laws were “really” intended to keep people safe from food poisoning, and since we understand hygiene or food preparation better than our “pre-scientific” ancestors, the laws (including Levitical laws on homosexuality) no longer apply.

This example illustrates two mistakes. First, it asserts a factual claim that may not be true: commentators who write about Leviticus tend not to believe that the laws of kosher are motivated by concern about hygiene. The second mistake is that it uses a type of argument that can be called “reductionistic.” It assumes that a religious position is not motivated by religious reasons but is really motivated by reasons of psychology or beliefs about what is thought to be a scientific fact. Once that is assumed, then the psychology or science can be rejected as old-fashioned, and the religious belief rejected. Thus, a religious belief is reduced to something else.

A second example of a misplaced use of scientific arguments is the dismissal of opposition to homosexuality as really being “homophobia” or “fear of your own sexuality.” This employs psychology as a weapon to defeat people rather than to understand them. This argument assumes that an explanation for a religious opinion is to be first found as a projection of some psychological dysfunction, and that once we reduce a religious question to a question of psychology we can solve it on those terms.

¹¹ For a recent, extensive, treatment of Levitical laws, see Milgrom, *Leviticus*.

This is not a form of argument religious people should use. It undermines the very notion that there could be a religious argument at all. The consequences of allowing this are dangerous. If opponents of homosexuality arrive at their views as a projection of their psychology, then why shouldn't proponents be subject to the same analysis? If an opponent of homosexuality is homophobic, then why are not advocates simply projecting their narcissism and self-indulgence by contending that restrictive rules should not apply to them? Perhaps proponents are still working out adolescent issues of rebelling against restrictive social institutions, or have unresolved issues about their mother?

Of course our psychology does influence and at times control the intellectual arguments we make. The point is that we shouldn't use such arguments in public against people we don't know.

Using the "**natural**" as a moral criterion.

While I think this is the same issue as the immediately previous section, it plays out differently in the debate on homosexuality.

A defense of homosexuality is sometimes made that it is "natural," based on genetics, observation of early childhood behavior or surveying various cultures. It does seem that scientific research has identified a "gay gene," or at least it appears so for now. But this is not proof that the behavior should be accepted. There might be a gene for homophobia; there are genes for diseases. Cancer, for example, is deeply woven into our DNA¹² and would occur in some cases even if no one smoked and there was no pollution or human-created radiation.

Nor will surveying cultures and showing that homosexuality is widespread prove that it is "natural" or prove that it should be accepted. It certainly seems "natural" for some people not to be faithful to their spouses, and for some people to abuse children or to be greedy. It is quite natural to justify yourself, to give yourself the benefit of the doubt but hold others to strict standards. War is a near-universal phenomenon of human culture and thus seems to be completely natural.

The Christian view of nature is to see it as "fallen:" filled with sin and death as the consequence of sin. Some natural things belong to the fallen order, some do not.

To be sure, claiming that homosexual behavior is natural is a useful counter to those who base their rejection of homosexuality on it being "unnatural." However, I think that the use of opponents of homosexuality of the concept of "unnatural" is the identical confusion as the use of "natural" is by proponents. People who view homosexual behavior as "unnatural" tend also to view it as disgusting, offensive or dirty: categories of moral choices, not scientific observation.

¹² Varmus & Weinberg, *Genes*, 1993.

And these categories tend to be about “what I grew up with” not “what I’ve thought about.” In other words the “natural” vs. “unnatural” debate is often about “familiar” or “unfamiliar.”

But in the end, all of this discussion about science confuses “what is” with “what ought to be.”

Our fetish of being **democratic**, being individually **autonomous**, and our use of **privacy** rights as a criterion for deciding religious questions.

These are separate arguments, but related in using arguments appropriate for a secular democracy in a religious discussion. We want to vote on all issues, even issues that require expertise to decide, because no one's opinion can be allowed to have any more weight than anyone else's. Conversely, we do not want to be bound by anything, seeing ourselves as totally autonomous, able to say "none of your business," about our own behavior and "live and let live" about our neighbor's.

In democratic society, we can indeed adopt the view that people are free to do what they want as long as no one else is harmed. And, we insist, or hope we could insist, that people are treated as individuals, not as members of groups. These rules limit the inevitably abused and abusive power of the state. From this perspective the issue of homosexuality is easy to solve. Homosexuals are free to practice their lifestyle until such point as an individual homosexual harms someone else.

However, civil liberties as a criterion may be the proper answer to the question for a democracy, but it can't answer the question for the church. Everything is God's business (but not necessarily the church bureaucracy's business). We can't say "none of your business" to God (as Jonah discovered). Sexual abuse, alcoholism, arguments that rip people apart, consumerism, workaholism, burnout, and drugging yourself with hours of television all take place in the "privacy of our own home," and often between "two consenting adults." It does not mean that there are no moral issues at stake.

The pain we cause homosexuals as a reason for changing our views.

Homosexuals are undoubtedly discriminated against in the church, suffering abuse, rejection as well as being patronized by well-meaning but uninformed people. Then, they suffer abuse from fellow homosexuals for being associated with an institution that has inflicted so much pain on gay people.¹³ This situation is compelling, and induces compassion in many Christians.

However, we can't simply refer to this pain as a reason for changing the church's policy. We can see this more clearly by using the same argument on different cases. Would we stop our opposition to gambling because of the pain our opposition causes compulsive gamblers? Would we stop our opposition to wife beating because of the pain and embarrassment we cause these

¹³ “It was harder to come out as Christian to my gay friends than it was to come out as gay to my Christian friends,” words from a gay, Christian friend of mine, in 1987.

men? If homosexuality is wrong, then the church has an obligation to challenge gays to confront their lives. Simple affirmation of what people “want to do” is not a Christian view: consider how much of Christian life is about “taking up your cross” and “denying self”, even “losing your life to save it”?

This argument commits the fallacy of “assuming the conclusion.” What is assumed in this argument is that the pain homosexuals endure for being challenged about their lives is unjust pain. In other words, it assumes the conclusion. Also, as a practical matter, this argument won’t be effective. People opposed to homosexuality are not going to find the pain a gay person feels in an unaccepting church to be a problem. They will regard it as just.

Of course, the church inflicts much less pain on gamblers or even sexual abusers than it does homosexuals. That is something all should reflect on.

However, this is close to being an important argument. I will argue in a later chapter that the experience of gays is of relevance to our decision, but in a different way.

Using contemporary **cultural mores** as normative.

Sometimes we say, “society has changed” as an argument for adopting a new ethic in the church on some issues. But culture is not a god. Some changes are to the better (civil rights, environmental concerns, women's liberation), while other changes are a horror (crime, more addictive drugs, violence against children, family breakdown). This view attempts to short circuit the entire argument by painting the church as “behind” and appealing to our sense of guilt to make us want to “catch up” to society. It is easy to fall into this argument since the church is so routinely “behind” the culture in harmful ways.

Some people do often just assume that “modern” is “progressive.” Thus the Bible, since it is from an older, pre-scientific culture, is assumed not to contain the “latest insights,” or use “modern wisdom.” This is an assumption, based on the truth that modern science is an advance on ancient science. However, if the Bible is scripture, then it must be timeless. Of course we will use modern insights to understand it, but if this is a religious argument, it cannot assume that secular culture is superior to the core text of the religion.

A different aspect of this issue comes from those who reject the Bible as narrow, or quaint, implying that the Bible might be quite all right for “religious” questions (death, perhaps) but it has no bearing on “real” or “practical” questions. By contrast, I think the Bible is only too obviously about real and important questions.

Making **Spiritual and charismatic** experiences normative.

Conventional charismatic activity is not much in evidence in Lutheranism or other mainstream denominations at the moment, however, this is also the proper name for views that the Bible can

be interpreted by what "I know" independent of tradition, what "I just feel" or "what my heart tells me." This view holds the Bible hostage to private views claiming a spiritual authority by inner revelation. Of course, an inner enlightenment that puts the speaker at odds with the entire church is sometimes God's work (for example, Luther). But such inner authority must, we hold, be able to articulate an argument that is shaped and remains obedient to scripture (as did Luther). If God has revealed something to you, is it likely it is inconsistent with what God revealed in scripture? Not if we think scripture is revelation from God.

The ELCA sexuality document makes this mistake when it seems to suggest without qualification that the experience of gay and lesbian people should be taken, in an uncritical way, as equal to the Bible in authority.¹⁴ Curiously, opponents of homosexuality also claim the right to private revelation. They castigate advocates of change as "innovators" undermining "the church's historical tradition," yet they also declare that if the church changes its mind on homosexuality, they will regard that decision as invalid, and not one they must observe.

This privatistic view inevitably backfires, undermining any collective decision-making. The church needs a public, collective policy that will bind its public activities of ordination, church membership, and so forth.

Attempts to **bypass** the proof texts for cultural reasons.

There is no doubt that the modern institution of a committed relationship between two homosexuals of relatively equal age, power and status was unknown in ancient times.¹⁵ For that matter, the stereotype of homosexuals as being promiscuous, having vast numbers of partners and forming a separate "queer" sub-culture was also not the ancient pattern. Homosexual behavior in classical Greek culture (500-400 BC) was typically between an adult male and a young man who had not yet reached puberty.¹⁶ Condemnations of homosexuality by Paul (made approximately 50-65 AD) may have been addressed to a behavior we would view as child molestation rather than homosexuality.

That situation has been used to argue that the Bible texts about homosexuality should not be considered binding on us. But this is not a valid argument. An argument about cultural differences still is assuming that scripture addresses issues in a legal way, and that its wisdom is to be assessed with the form of distinction-drawing used by courts for assessing case law.

There are other problems in resorting to this move. Perhaps the Biblical authors would have objected to equal relations between two adult homosexuals if the option had been given them. Also, if we are to use the changes in culture as a reason to bypass a text, why should that only

¹⁴ *First Draft*, p. 13 line 5, p. 16 line 39-40.

¹⁵ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, p.57ff.

¹⁶ Cohen, *Law, sexuality, and society*, pp. 171ff; Thornton, *Eros pp. 99ff*; Oxford Classical Dictionary, "homosexuality."

apply to homosexuality? We don't have the same economic system as 2,000 years ago, does that mean that the Bible's many texts on economic justice do not apply to the current society?

While this type of argument might support a change on homosexuality, it is not the sort of hermeneutic we want to adopt for all issues, and so we shouldn't use it here.

Attempts to find **proof-texting support** for homosexuality.

There are a few attempts to find support for homosexuality in the Bible. Passages used include the references to the "beloved disciple,"¹⁷ and the suggestion that David and Johnathen's love¹⁸ implies a homosexual connection. However, this view can't survive any serious exegesis.¹⁹

In any case, I will in the next chapter start to explain why such proof-texting should not be considered a valid approach to justifying homosexuality.

C. Conclusions

The forms of justification listed in the previous section form a rather large fraction of the justifications offered for changing the church's position. None of them would really be considered a theological argument. Many of them are simply further examples of the anti-intellectualism and individualism that are endemic in our nation's culture.

¹⁷ For example, John 19:26 "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he..."

¹⁸ 1 Samuel 18-20, 2 Samuel 1:26: "my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women."

¹⁹ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, p. 119.

4. Why biblical arguments for rejecting homosexuality fail: literal meanings

A. Introduction

Doesn't the Bible openly reject homosexuality? The most common type of biblical argument against homosexuality is to point to one of the several proof-texts on homosexuality (such as Leviticus 18:22 "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination," or Romans 1:26-27 "Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another.") and then assert that they are "plain" in their meaning, they still apply today, and they should determine our personal behavior and church policy.

It all sounds very clear and obvious. But it is only clear if you do not read any more verses. Once you read the rest of the Bible, it is not so obvious what those verses mean. Some plain texts disagree with each other. Other plain texts are rejected, even by conservatives who hold that the Bible should be literally obeyed. Other texts seem to plainly say that the homosexual texts apply to a narrow group of people.

Earlier, the word "hermeneutic" was introduced along with the idea that we have to think about how we read the Bible. This chapter begins to look at this question.

Behind this way of rejecting homosexuality are two assumptions about how the Bible should be read. The first assumption is that the Bible is a book of rules to solve our problems and to use it one should look up the subject to be considered, turns to the correct one or two verses and read off the answer in an unambiguous fashion. The second idea is that the Bible is infallible or "inerrant": incapable of error, is literally true in all particulars.

This chapter examines the problems with these ideas. The next chapter examines other types of biblical arguments against homosexuality that are not so closely tied to specific texts.

B. Selective application of inerrantist views

I have never found anyone, in print or in person, who follows through on the argument that all the laws in the Bible should be observed. By this, I do not mean that people fail, from human weakness, to observe the commands in their own life. Rather, I refer to the universal practice of rejecting some laws while insisting on others. Those who argue that homosexual proof texts must, without question be obeyed, will, often in the same argument, wave away other legal texts.

Proof-texting is common, and done by all political persuasions. The conservatives are easiest to skewer. Leviticus 18:22 says "you shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination," and Leviticus 20:13 says "if a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them." Yet, almost no conservatives favor enforcing the punishment, why? Where in the Bible does it say

the punishment is not applicable? Leviticus 18:19 says "You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness" and we all agree this is unimportant now, but where is the warrant for saying that verse 19 is irrelevant and verse 22 is God's holy word, tampered with at risk of condemnation?

Where are the literalists thundering about obeying God's holy word at the church's ignoring the "clear word" on treatment for leprosy (Lev. 14) or shaving the edges of beards (Lev. 19:27)? One verse certainly implies that a fetus is not a person (Ex. 21:22, in imposing a reduced punishment for causing a miscarriage), yet it has not stopped those who oppose abortion.

Even more amazing is Proverbs 11:1: "A false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but an accurate weight is his delight." Why does the word "abomination" mean in Leviticus a situation on which our whole faith stands or falls, but when the same Hebrew word appears in Proverbs it is "politics" or "social action" and therefore to be waved away? This is all the more significant as there are more verses in the Old Testament devoted to false weights than there are verses devoted to homosexuality.²⁰

Various figures in the Old Testament are allowed moral practices that would not be considered acceptable by those opposed to homosexuality: multiple wives²¹, aggressive military campaigns, and slaves.²² Strangely, no one seems to think there is any problem with rejecting these practices, yet they are in the "law book" of scripture.

Conservatives tend to advocate strict application of the rules on homosexuality, but do not tend to feel that way about "economic" texts that command tithing (Deuteronomy 14:22) or the forgiveness of debts (Deuteronomy 15:1)²³

Flogging when done by followers of Islam many consider to be primitive or ungodly, yet it is commanded for certain offenses by Deuteronomy 25:1-3.

Nor is selective application limited to the Old Testament. What opponent of homosexuality considers Matthew 5:39 ("... do not resist an evildoer...") normative, either for personal conduct or for a nation's foreign policy?

But liberals have much to answer for also. They love Galatians 3:28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus," but interpret away Ephesians 5. They approve of Matthew 5:39, but are usually silent about Matthew 5:32, seven verses away, on divorce.

If you assume the Bible is a law book, then it turns out to be a law book nobody, liberal or conservative, wants to or can apply in all cases. As a seminary professor put it, "Conservatives

²⁰ See Leviticus 19:36, Deuteronomy 25:13-15, Proverbs 20:10, Micah 6:11.

²¹ Gen 4:19 for an example; Exodus 21:10 for the law permitting the practice.

²² Exodus 21:20-26; Leviticus 25:44-46.

²³ For careful discussions of this book, see Nelson, *Deuteronomy* and Tigay, *Deuteronomy*.

are literalists on sexual texts but interpret economic texts; liberals are literalists on economic texts but interpret sexual texts.”²⁴

This similarity between liberal and conservative leads to the conclusion that the theory of "scripture as a law book" is not in fact what people believe. It is the criteria they use when they have an opponent who is violating a law they like, but they don't apply it to themselves.

Conclusion

To claim that the Bible is infallible, or that a verse has an absolute demand on us, but then to immediately argue that other verses should be ignored is to show that the position of infallibility is being used as a weapon in an argument, and is not what the person actually believes. I'm sure reasons can be given that homosexuality is a more important issue than intercourse with menstruating women, but once you start to say one verse is more important than another, then you are no longer using the literal obedience to scripture as your one and only principle of interpretation.

C. The literal meaning of the proof-texts

What do the proof-texts actually imply, if you read them closely? The answers are sometimes more complicated than would be expected. Selected texts are examined here.

Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20

Jacob Milgrom in his magisterial commentaries on Leviticus²⁵ has suggested that the “literal” meaning of the Levitical prohibitions is not a prohibition on all homosexual activities. Reading the text “literally” he points out the following: the prohibition applies only to ancient Israelites, or to inhabitants of Israel, it applies only to anal intercourse, it applies only to men, not women, and it may only apply to sex between men of the same kinship connections that is prohibited for heterosexual relations.

Milgrom also contends that rules about homosexuality in Leviticus are concerned with and are derived from the command to “be fruitful and multiply.” Thus male homosexuality and masturbation are prohibited (since they spill seed) but lesbianism is not (because it does not reduce the birth rate). Milgrom then makes the observation that the “be fruitful” command has been fulfilled – even over fulfilled and thus the commands derived from it need not apply.

Even if this last point is not compelling, it is certainly the “plain meaning” of this text that it applies to Israel and not to all people. Even more indisputable is that it applies to men and not to women.

²⁴ Prof. Robert Smith, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, personal conversation.

²⁵ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, and Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22* (especially at 1785-90).

Genesis 2: “a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife...”

Support for the primacy of heterosexual marriage is drawn from Genesis 2:24: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.”

Conservatives argue that this indicates that God intends for men and women to come together in marriage and that homosexual unions are therefore prohibited. Of course, this interpretation would also prohibit remaining single, which is in complete contradiction to the church’s glorification of celibacy for its ministers and bishops for most of its history. Then too, does the movement of the man away from his family to the woman imply a matriarchal society?²⁶ This seems the literal meaning of those words.

Others have not found the text so clear. The author of Ephesians (5:32) called this verse “a great mystery” and applied it to Christ and the church rather than to relations between men and women.²⁷

Sodom, Gomorrah and Sodomites

The assertion is often made that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah²⁸ is primarily about homosexuality (as opposed to gang rape or inhospitality). We “all know” that it is about homosexuality, except that the Bible doesn’t seem to know this. When the story is referenced later in the Bible, the focus is not on homosexuality²⁹ but usually using the fate of the city as a warning of the ultimate punishment God can inflict. Still more compelling is the point that if the attackers are homosexual, then the tactic of offering them a woman will not likely be effective.³⁰ Yet, because Sodom, in modern usage, is considered a synonym for homosexuality, it is common to assume these verses condemn homosexuality.

The literal meaning of translated words

Certain words about prohibited sexual behavior do not always literally mean what they are assumed to mean. Examples would include the words often translated as “fornication” and “Sodomite.” “Fornication,” (πονηρός) then and now apparently means “sexual immorality.” We tend to assume that “sexual immorality” means what our society has traditionally condemned, but there is no explicit definition of this word in the Bible that would show it includes homosexuality. The word translated (especially in older English Bible versions) as

²⁶ Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, p. 253. Westermann does not think the verse implies a matriarchal society.

²⁷ As did early church writers Augustine, Jerome and Quodvultdeus. Louth, *Genesis 1-11*, p. 70.

²⁸ Genesis 19. Note that God had resolved to destroy the city for its wickedness *prior* to this assault (Gen 18:20-33).

²⁹ The clearest statement is Ezekiel 16:49: “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” Jude v.7 specifies a sexual sin, but not which one (gang rape is a sexual sin).

³⁰ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, p. 48, 51.

“Sodomites”³¹ (ἀρσενικοίταί lit, “soft man”) is not a reference to Sodom at all. The underlying word likely refers to a type of homosexual behavior, perhaps specifically the man who is penetrated by another male, but the word is not a Greek form for “Sodom.”³² If you had asked someone in Biblical times what a “Sodomite” was, they would have said, “someone who lived in Sodom.”

D. The Bible itself rejects a simple inerrant way of reading the Bible

The meaning of individual verses can be analyzed, but we can also look at the form of the Bible: what kind of material it has and how the text is put together. When we do that, we can see all sorts of evidence that the Bible is not in the form of a series of inerrant laws. Indeed, there are many aspects of the Biblical text that seem to be signals directing us not to try to read the text as a literally true set of laws. Various examples include the following.

1. Some historical events are described in more than one place in the Bible. These multiple versions can contradict each other. Examples from the New Testament include:

- The account of the resurrection in the four gospels disagree about who was present and who Jesus appeared to after his resurrection.³³
- The cleansing of the temple by Jesus occurs at the beginning of his ministry in John 2:14-22 and at the end of his ministry in the other three gospels.
- The ascension is put at different times in Luke and in Acts (and the same person is widely thought to have written both books.)
- There are several thorny issues of disagreement in chronology, church policy and theology between the Book of Acts and Paul's letters.³⁴

From the Old Testament, examples include the differences between the two creation stories in Genesis, or the claim that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible (which flounders on the issue of how Moses could have written about his own death).

2. There are contradictions in **theological statements**. Some examples include:

- Mark 9:40 says: "Whoever is not against us is for us," but Matthew 12:30 says: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters."
- Romans 3:24: "... they are now justified by his grace as a gift..." and Galatians 2:16: "we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ," are a bit hard to reconcile with James 2:24: "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone."
- Statements about the trinity disagree with each other. John 7:39 strongly implies that the Holy Spirit is not an eternal person of the Trinity. I John 5:7 sets up a different trinity.

³¹ Used at I Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10.

³² πονηρός and ἀρσενικοίτης See Balz, EDNT. Also, Martin, Dale, B., “Arsenokoites and Malakos”

³³ Also note the differences with what Paul says about the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8.

³⁴ Johnson, *Acts*, p.4-5; Brown, *Introduction*, p. 324; Fitzmyer, *Acts*, p. 133.

- There are many examples from the Old Testament that certainly sound like God is changing as to intent: at first set on destruction, then wavering, then deciding not to punish. Hosea, especially chapter 11, is one rather spectacular example.
- Romans 13 commands obedience to the government but Acts 4:19, 5:28 praises those who obey God and not earthy authorities and Revelation terms the government evil.
- The baptism stories of Jesus, with their lurking adoptionism³⁵ do not agree with John 1.
- Baptismal formulas in Acts (4:19, 5:28-29, 19:5) do not agree with the one in Matthew 28:19.

3. There are **images and metaphor** that cannot be equated with literal meanings. What is the literal meaning of a reference to God having emotions of anger, regret, pity³⁶ and the like, or of God being described as having human appendages and organs and moving about like a human?³⁷ These passages do have meaning, but they cannot have a literal meaning like a legal language does.

4. We also know that the **use** New Testament writers often make of Old Testament passages would not be consistent with viewing scripture as inerrant.³⁸ The citations of the Old Testament in Mark 1:2 and Matthew 27:9 are simply incorrect. In addition, John 7:38 and I Corinthians 2:9 quote texts not in the Old Testament. For that matter, Jude 14-5 quotes I Enoch 1:9 as scripture. The difference between the Septuagint and Hebrew Old Testament texts is also troubling for establishing the inerrant text.

5. The **intended audience** of various passages are different. Some sections seem most obviously to be addressed to Israel, some to specific communities, some to the world.³⁹ When God is described as the “one who brought us up out of Egypt,” this can’t refer to descendents of Gentile Christians. The Bible is different from a true law book that is a uniform collection addressed to a defined group.

6. There are four gospels describing the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. This observation deserves more attention. The four present a similar story from beginnings, to baptism, to ministry, to opposition, to a pivotal week in Jerusalem, to the death of Jesus at the hands of the authorities, to his resurrection. And yet, there are great differences of tone, emphasis, material, stories, sequence, motive and meanings. In one sense the four gospels do not disagree about anything that matters. And in another sense, they disagree about many specific details. Why are their four gospels and why do they diverge in just this way? Is it a testimony

³⁵ *Adoptionism* holds that Jesus only became divine later in life after being born human. Orthodox Christian theology insists that Jesus was divine from the beginning.

³⁶ Respectively, see: Isaiah 30:27-30, Genesis 6:5-6, Judges 2:18

³⁷ For example, Psalm 33:18: “Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love”

³⁸ Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 1991.

³⁹ Deuteronomy contains a number of introductions to legal rules. These introductions seem to literally mean they apply to people living within biblical Israel. For example, Deuteronomy 12:1 “These are the statutes and ordinances that you must diligently observe in the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has given you to occupy all the days that you live on the earth.” Other examples are at Deuteronomy 4:1, 6:1, 8:1.

saying that the meaning of Jesus can never be captured in one vision? Is it also a testimony that literal-mindedness is not where the true lies?

When issues such as these are raised, people typically feel that the Bible has been attacked, undermined or ridiculed. Yet, all of these examples are based entirely on internal aspects of scripture. One solution is to say that the scripture is a disorganized, inconsistent book. Another approach is to question our assumption that the Bible is a law book and thus must be consistent the way laws must be. To me, these observations about scripture prove that we are not to be literalist about scripture, indeed, that the Bible itself is giving evidence that we are not to use it primarily as a book of laws.

While arguments like these in this section are often used by those who wish to tear down the Bible, I believe that, to the contrary, these arguments prove the genius of the Bible. Few laws written two thousand years ago have any relevance to our society, nor are they even referred to other than by historians. By contrast, the Bible still proves able to speak to people.

E. Conclusion

All the evidence of this chapter demonstrates that the theory that the Bible is intended to be a law book is false. It cannot be used that way, is not used that way, and the Bible itself does not intend it to be taken that way. Therefore arguments that look at two or three verses of scripture and come to conclusions about homosexuality are not valid.

5. Why biblical arguments for rejecting homosexuality fail: thematic meanings

A. Introduction

It is also common to make arguments against homosexuality that are based not on the meanings of individual verses but on themes in the Bible. In this chapter I discuss why these do not make effective arguments for rejecting homosexuality.

B. Arguments by analogy

Genesis 1-2: orders of creation

Genesis 1-2 is often assumed to set up "orders of creation" or to specify specific roles for the genders, or even to define the purpose of sex as for procreation only. None of these points are ever made specifically in the text itself, they are inferences that some draw from the text.

Categories of laws

In order to respond to the sort of arguments I have been making in this chapter and the previous one, conservatives often try to separate biblical texts into categories. In terms of inerrancy, sometimes it is said that the Bible is not inerrant as to historical matters (but is in regard to law), or inerrant only in its original texts (which we no longer have), or not inerrant on scientific matters (but is inerrant in regard to spiritual matters). The most appealing of these is the claim that the Bible is inerrant as to matters of salvation and faith but is transmitted to us in human form with various humanly introduced errors.

Still, this won't do. If the purpose of the Bible is to be a religious guide to us, why would so much space in the Old Testament be given to narrative if that is "just history" and not of concern to faith? These categories are not given in the Bible itself, they are inferences about the text. They may be useful distinctions, but they are an "interpretation" of scripture. If conservatives can interpret and divide texts into categories, why cannot liberals do the same?

The same issue can be applied to make categories of laws. A distinction is sometimes made between "cultic" laws (acknowledged to be overturned by Jesus) and "moral" laws (which are assumed to be valid still). But the Bible mixes "cult" and "morality" constantly. It is a cultic offense against God to treat your neighbor in an unethical fashion. These categories of laws may make analytical sense, but the categories aren't in the Bible.

Another attempt to save the literal passages are to use other verses of the Bible to show that these laws have been applied or extended. Thus it can be claimed that the cultic laws of sacrifice do not apply because of what is written in Hebrews, that food laws do not apply because of what

Jesus said⁴⁰ but that other laws do apply because Gentiles have been “grafted into” the Jewish faith (Romans 11:17, for example), and that prohibitions on homosexuality do apply specifically because of Romans 1:26-27 and Jude 7-8. I do not object to this style of argument, however I disagree with these specific conclusions. But again, once such a method of argument is accepted, as I think it should be, then we are open to considering many verses that would help us understand how to apply the laws to our present situation. This will be taken up in a later chapter.

C. Application of a Lutheran hermeneutic of "Law and Gospel"

Within my own denomination, there are some special problems of interpretation posed by theological emphases from our Reformation heritage, or more precisely, by what we think is our heritage. I will address one of these now. People not obsessed with Lutheran issues may wish to skip this section.

Lutherans have attempted to apply the categories of Law and Gospel as a way of affirming prohibitions on homosexuality. This attempt also flounders on a series of inconsistencies and lack of specifics.

Lutherans speak of how the Bible brings a message of Law and Gospel in a unified way. The Law is "to afflict the comfortable," by convicting of sin, the Gospel: "to comfort the afflicted," by proclaiming God in Jesus brings forgiveness of sins. Thus, the traditional prohibitions on homosexuality are part of what God wishes to convict us of. The Gospel proclaims we can be forgiven this sin.

However, this dynamic of Law and Gospel does not create a reason for rejecting homosexuality for several reasons.

Theory and practice

This central dogma of the Lutheranism is highly developed theoretically, but undeveloped in practice. Lutherans regularly assert that the Law should be used to order human life, but it is a theoretical concern, that remains "in the air" without any tradition of application to specific situations. This can be seen in various contexts.

In my own experience, when "the Law" is invoked it seems to have no practical effect other than to simply cancel the freedom of the gospel. The only times, I think, that I have ever seen "the Law" applied in to any concrete problem is when the policies of a church institution were being questioned as being unnecessarily hard, unforgiving, or legalistic, in short, of needing a gospel of love, compassion and forgiveness. The response was that "we still live under the law," and thus laws are necessary to regulate an institution in the world. This begs the question: which laws?

⁴⁰ Mark 7:19.

More than personal experience, the church has no developed literature or discussion of how to apply law to specific cases: no forum of argument nor established “case law” to draw from. I cannot remember a single practical discussion in all of my time in seminary or ministry about how the Law might function now in a specific context.⁴¹

Arguments against homosexuality using Law and Gospel

More formal efforts to use Law and Gospel to reject homosexuality fail to make convincing arguments. I will discuss three efforts from my own denomination.

A document from Luther Northwestern Seminary, dated October 1993⁴² tried to use the Law to reject the approach of the then recently published ELCA task force draft document. However, this document is not an “argument” in any real sense, it is better described as a collection of assertions. It sounds persuasive because we have heard it all before, but it does not construct a case in any way we could recognize. It begins by arguing that because of human sin and the fall we cannot live in some Eden of pure freedom: we need boundaries because we cannot trust ourselves to decide each situation correctly. Yes, this seems clearly so.

Well, then, where will we find, or how will we derive the specific boundaries that we need? Is “the Law” exactly the same for the Christian community as it was before the arrival of Jesus? If so, the gospel is reduced to a message about heaven only. If not, then we must determine what the Law is. We need not a generic term Law, but specific laws. So where are they? Is “the Law” the Old Testament holiness code? Surely not. Is it scattered references by Jesus? Lutheranism seems totally to have overlooked the fact that having argued that scripture is not a law book, not to be understood as having juridical authority, but rather a book that proclaims Christ, that it is just a wee bit of a contradiction to now say that we can read specific verses in the Bible as giving juridical commands about proper sexual behavior. I think this is an old mistake. They asked Jesus, should we pay tax to Caesar or not, and Jesus gave them not a juridical answer but a procedural answer, which exegetes have been trying to turn into a law for centuries.

A faculty member of the same seminary provided a second, related, argument.⁴³ Here the argument is for a more general notion of a scriptural law of “sexual boundaries” as argued from a number of texts. The author asserts that sexual boundaries pertain to the first use of the law and have the function protecting the weak of the community, as well as each of us for those things we are weak about. This need is real, but it then opens an analysis on the facts. Does, for example, the community need protecting against two adults of the same sex who wish to hold jobs, buy a house, participate in local organizations while they raise one or more children?

⁴¹ Perhaps the *Visions and Expectations for Ordained Ministers* document might be an exception.

⁴² A Response to the Report “The Church and Human Sexuality: A Lutheran Perspective” of October 1993.

⁴³ Koester, “The Bible and Sexual Boundaries.”

As the author goes on to assess various texts, it isn't very difficult to make the contention that some sexual behaviors are preferred over others. The author tries hard to read texts such as Genesis 1 and 2, among others, as mandating a specific boundary: the traditional "celibate when single, faithful when married."

While this is a useful attempt to become specific about what exactly is the law, it still does not address any fundamental questions of hermeneutics, again assuming that scripture can be read as a book of laws. Thus the author wants to condemn homosexuality but not be opposed to women's ordination and certainly doesn't want to endorse the death penalty for gays. In order to do so he must resort to a series of criteria of interpretation that border on the ad hoc.

James Nestingen has more recently used the categories of Law and Gospel to reject homosexuality.⁴⁴ He depicts Law as a necessary category for a Christian community. Sexuality is not a private matter, as the culture claims, but one with public consequences. He develops this argument at some length. Who would really disagree with this claim? Conservatives can think that some do so disagree. For conservatives in the church, "the culture" is depicted (not without cause) as claiming that sexuality is a private matter and that having sex is always a good thing, something that leads to self-fulfillment and growth. They wish to oppose that. But the crucial turn is when conservatives, as Nestingen does, link those homosexuals who wish to be Christian to those ideas. After referring to (and condemning) violence against gays, Nestingen writes, "By the same token, while pointing out that AIDS is an equal opportunity killer, afflicting heterosexuals and homosexuals, proponents of changing the church's stand will have to acknowledge that the large number of deaths does indicate a problem."

Those deaths are a problem, and a problem not unrelated to homosexual behavior. But what would Nestingen say about this statement from the U.S. Department of Justice? "In 2002, women experienced an estimated 494,570 rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault and simple assault victimizations at the hands of an intimate, down from 1.1 million in 1993. In 1993, men were victims of about 160,000 violent crimes by an intimate partner, and in 2002 men were victims of about 72,520 violent crimes by an intimate partner."⁴⁵ I think it a certainty that Nestingen, and other conservatives, are appalled by this level of violence. But they do not regard it as a condemnation of heterosexual couples, even though the vast majority of these crimes involve heterosexual partners. They would properly reject any notion this meant that "heterosexuals are inherently violent" and so they should also reject AIDS deaths as proof that homosexuals are inherently promiscuous.

What all these statistics show is that sex is an arena where people can abuse each other and the church should be preaching about that.

This double standard is not an isolated comment. Later in the paper, Nestingen writes "There has always been a special dimension to this promise [of the gospel] for those who

⁴⁴ Nestingen, "Lutheran Reformation."

⁴⁵ Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, web site at http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/cvict_c.htm.

have been caught up in their own sexuality. So the ELCA has committed itself to a special welcome for gays and lesbians.” The assumption is that being gay or lesbian is, inherently and obviously, to be “caught up in your own sexuality.” Parents of straight teen-agers may wish to add other examples of who might be “caught up in your own sexuality.”

The standards for clergy sexual behavior have often been somewhat different than for general members of the church, and Nestigen defends this distinction. Referring to tighter scrutiny of pastors brought on by sexual misconduct, he writes, “... given the church’s standards and the holdings of state courts, all clergy are legally responsible for their sexual practices. If the church does change its policies on ordination, homosexual clergy will have to be willing to give a legally defensible account of their sexual practices.” He repeats this point later in the paper. It’s unclear from the context if this should be read as a warning to homosexuals or a threat. In any case, the argument does not hold water. Heterosexual clergy are not required to give a “legally defensible account” of all their sexual practices, just those involving people over whom they have some authority (the principal example being those who come to them for counseling). While not defending the practice, clergy who have affairs, go to strip clubs, download pornography or visit prostitutes are not required to account for this activity unless it becomes public when it becomes embarrassing and may cause their resignation, but it is not a legal issue (unless actual laws are broken).

Is the assumption that homosexual clergy will all be rampantly promiscuous, and thus constantly embarrassing the church?

Aside from the logical problems of this argument against homosexuality, note what is being used for evidence: our observations about the actual behavior of homosexuals. This is, in other words, an argument that does not start from the Bible, nor does it start from “Law and Gospel.” It starts from horror at sexual practices of those different from oneself. Later in this paper, a different sort of examination of homosexuals, one conducted through the lens of the Bible, will reveal a different answer.

Law and Gospel in the Lutheran Confessions

It is a beloved tactic in Lutheranism to accuse your opponents of not having a “right distinction between Law and Gospel,” as mandated by Lutheran confessions. Since few have read the confessions and don’t want to risk public embarrassment by challenging someone who appears to be an expert in them, it is an effective rhetorical technique for claiming a presumption for your position. In the homosexuality debate, the full exchange is usually as follows. Someone mentions the Levitical prohibition on homosexuality. Someone else contends that the gospel has obliterated this. Then the argument is made that this has conflated law and gospel, or worse yet, is an “antinomian”⁴⁶. Point to the conservatives.

⁴⁶ Literally, lawlessness. One who rejects the controls of a socially established morality.

In fact, Lutheran confessions⁴⁷ mention Law and Gospel in several places, all without ever (as far as I know) defining in detail what the law is.⁴⁸ The one major discussion⁴⁹ certainly does not advocate a wild freedom of the gospel where all can do whatever they want. However, the only significant example of what is meant by conflating Law and Gospel is making “the gospel a teaching of law,” the opposite of what opponents of homosexuality would hope was condemned. In other words, what the confessions are concerned about is turning grace into Law, not about overturning Law.

Law and Gospel

The comments here will doubtless bring on howls of “antinomianism” and much bluster about “modern innovations” amid calls for “solid declarations” of “pure doctrine.” However, all I have said is that the Lutheran confessions do not define what the law is, but do say that we should keep it. We still have all the fundamental hermeneutical question of how we find law and what is sin. There is no article in the confessions pertaining to principles of biblical interpretation, none.⁵⁰ However, the Protestant Reformation did produce valuable principles of interpretation, and to them we now turn.

⁴⁷ Tappert, *The Book of Concord*.

⁴⁸ The Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII implies a rejection of kosher and ceremonial law. Other passages affirm the Ten Commandments.

⁴⁹ Formula of Concord, article V.

⁵⁰ Ralph Bohlmann, “Confessional Biblical Interpretation: Some Basic Principles,” in Reumann, *Studies*.

6. How should the Bible be used?

A. Introduction

Having criticized both advocates and opponents for how they used the Bible and did not use it, now it becomes my turn to explain how I think it should be used. As I have said in a previous chapter, the church has been struggling with the question of how to read and understand the Bible for its entire existence. The whole question has come into a time of crisis in modern, western society with little sign of the crisis being resolved. So, of course, the task of answering in a convincing, persuasive manner how we should read the Bible is a task that is simply impossible. It is also inevitable. There is no escape from trying because to write or say anything at all on homosexuality while invoking the Bible or Christianity is, implicitly, to give your own view of how the Bible should have authority. One can cover up the question, but never avoid it.

I will propose a set of principles for how we should read the Bible. These principles will come from examining the Protestant Reformation. I will describe how Luther and other reformers developed a view of the authority of scripture. This is neither a fundamentalist approach nor does it diminish the Bible. It is a middle way that can be used by the church today.⁵¹

B. What the Reformation reformed

The Reformation rejected both the church's *methods* of interpretation and the hierarchy of *interpreters* culminating in the Pope. In their place, they invited all Christians to use their reason in understanding the Bible.

Medieval four-fold exegesis rejected in favor of **a plain, clear book**.

The reformers rejected the traditional medieval methods of Biblical exegesis. In the medieval scheme there were at least four possible meanings of a text, the famous quartet of literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical meanings. This method of interpretation was always technical and now is of interest only to specialists. However, it was not as obscure nor as mechanical as it appears. This method was complex and closed. An interpretation must relate to some previously held position of a patristic author and, in principle if not in practice, new interpretations could not exist.⁵² The reformers rejected the idea of this complexity and the idea that interpretation was closed.

Scripture was said to have one plain, clear, meaning, not the four, or more of medieval exegesis. This "plain meaning," however is neither literal in the modern sense, nor simple, as if it were

⁵¹ For this chapter generally, see, Braaten & Jensen, *Christian Dogmatics*, pp. 61ff; Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, p. 323ff; Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, and Grant and Tracy, *A Short History of Interpretation of the Bible*.

⁵² Karlfried Froehlich, "Problems of Lutheran Hermeneutics," in Reumann, *Studies*.

some sort of rejection of “book larnin” in favor of snap judgments by the uneducated. The plain meaning could be subtle and deep.⁵³ The Reformers certainly defended the idea that scripture was infinitely deep and open to new insights to the believer after persistent study.

Luther admitted that God was mysterious and that some verses of the Bible could be obscure, but not the subject. “I admit, of course, that there are many texts in the Scriptures that are obscure and abstruse, not because of the majesty of their subject matter, but because of our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar; but these text in no way hinder a knowledge of all the subject matter of Scripture. ... If the words are obscure in one place, yet they are plain in another.”⁵⁴

To Luther, the clarity of scripture is an article of faith, “In short, if Scripture is obscure or ambiguous, what point was there in God’s giving it to us? Are we not obscure and ambiguous enough without having our obscurity, ambiguity, and darkness augmented for us from heaven?”

And Luther rejects all complex images or figures (“tropes”) “Let us rather take the view that neither an inference nor a trope is admissible in any passage of Scripture, unless it is forced on us by the evident nature of the context and the absurdity of the literal sense as conflicting with one or another of the articles of faith. Instead, we must everywhere stick to the simple, pure, and natural sense of the words that accords with the rules of grammar and the normal use of language as God has created it in man.”

It is unlikely that anyone today defends the medieval style of biblical interpretation that Luther so roundly rejects. However, the question of hidden meanings versus plain meanings in accord with logic and language is still with us.

The authority of the patristic authors rejected in favor of the **Bible itself**.

In the Medieval world, great authority was given to Patristic⁵⁵ authors. To support your position, you would assemble and arrange quotes from Patristic authors, giving them authority like that of the Bible.

Luther rejected this. This can be seen clearly in the Leipzig debate in 1519 between Eck and Luther. Here, Eck demanded that Luther stick to Patristic authorities, and Luther wanted to discuss the Bible directly.⁵⁶

Luther’s position was that he was not rejecting tradition, but a traditionalism that in fact abused the tradition. The real tradition was to give authority to scripture. Patristic authors had authority to the extent they were grounded in scripture. Patristic authors openly cited scripture as their

⁵³ Pelikan, Jaroslav, *The Reformation of the Bible*, 30-36.

⁵⁴ Luther, “Bondage of the Will,” v.36. at p 25-26, p. 89 and 162 respectively.

⁵⁵ Patristic authors: the “Church Fathers,” writers from the first few centuries of the church who had been deemed orthodox.

⁵⁶ Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, p. 111.

authority, and denied that their human opinions should count as equal to scripture. That was the model for all to follow.⁵⁷ Luther and the reformers respected Patristic authors.

External systems rejected in favor of the **primacy** of the Bible.

The term *sola scriptura* (“scripture alone”) arose during the Reformation. One aspect of what this meant to the Reformers is that the Bible does not need external systems, either external philosophical or theological systems, in order to understand it.⁵⁸ Rather than starting with some categories or terms from a philosophical system and seeing how to organize the Bible to fit into the categories, one should start from the Bible itself. Nor should our understanding of the Bible be filtered through the external system of the church’s tradition. “Scripture interprets scripture.” The scripture itself is “source and norm.”

The Pope and the church as authorities of interpretation rejected in favor of **each Christian** reading the Bible.

There is a further implication to be drawn from the points made above. Removing Patristic authors and church councils and philosophical systems from a position of authority over the Bible was not just about documents. It was not just a case that current theologians, church councils and the Pope should use the Bible instead of the writings of previous theologians, councils and Pontiffs. The more daring and revolutionary thrust of the Reformers was that Bible interpretation did not belong just to those authorities but to all Christians.

Luther and the reformers rejected the church’s that the Pope and gatherings of all the church’s leaders in a church council were infallible interpreters of scripture. This also came out in the Leipzig debate as Luther dared to say that church councils could in fact err. As with Patristic authors, so with church councils, they should be judged by their agreement with scripture.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, there is a tradition that “the church created scripture.”⁵⁹ Thus the church, which made scripture, could control the interpretation of scripture and the church’s tradition becomes a record of that. This view of the Bible as a product of the church, shocking to many western Christians, would also be rejected.

These conclusions come from saying that scripture is “clear.” If scripture can only be understood with the aid of secret knowledge, or by divine inspiration that is given only to the ordained, then ordinary Christians just have to accept the explanations those leaders give about what the Bible means. If, on the other hand, scripture has a meaning that is, in some sense “clear,” then it is logical to suggest that any Christian could understand it, or understand the explanations of those who have studied it and judge the explanations offered by officials. Therefore, Christians should understand scripture and participate in the effort to understand it. And thus, Luther’s drive to

⁵⁷ Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, p. 80ff.

⁵⁸ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, p. 189ff.

⁵⁹ Ware, Timothy, *The Orthodox Church*.

translate the scripture into German⁶⁰ so every Christian in his country could read it or hear it read and begin the process of coming to understand it. So also was his motivation to write the Small and Large Catechism and to provide prefaces for each book of the Bible.

“The Pope,” Luther said, “is no judge of matters pertaining to God’s word and faith. But the Christian man must examine and judge for himself.”⁶¹

This view, however, should not be equated with the modern idea of individualism where each can do as they see fit. This will be discussed in more detail later.

C. What the Reformation affirmed

The Canon within the Canon: What proclaims Christ

Luther did reach behind scripture for a criterion of interpretation, creating a “canon within the canon” of “what proclaims Christ.” The criterion used to determine which texts of the Bible were most authoritative is one that privileges the proclamation about Jesus as the primary purpose of scripture. If the gospel (Jesus’ incarnation, the cross, and the proclamation of this) was prior to the written texts of the New Testament, then, the gospel could judge among scripture texts. This is the source of Luther’s antipathy to books like James, which seemed to him to be simply moralizing texts of the “do good and God will like you” variety, antithetical to the free gift of the gospel.

What then of actual behavior and laws that would determine behavior? It is a common Lutheran view that good works would come only as people’s lives were transformed by Christ.⁶² Lutherans were deeply suspicious of any system (and certainly any state run system) that purported to create a good society. Proclaiming the gracious gift of God, and relying on people to respond to that gift was alleged to be enough. This worry has led to extremes in Lutheran history where any actual transformation of people’s lives (sanctification) cannot be discussed as it is inevitably thought to lead to pride, a claim of self-sanctification and become “works righteousness.”⁶³ Careful readers will have noted the contradiction to the Lutheran view of the previous chapter where keeping “the Law” was regarded as critical and independent from proclaiming the gospel. This schizophrenia remains unresolved in actual practice, despite the attempt to develop a “third use of the law” for the guidance of the faithful.

⁶⁰ The first version of the New Testament came out in 1524, the full Bible was completed in 1534. Luther was not the first to do such a translation, but his came to dominate the culture. See, Pelikan, *Reformation of the Bible*, p. 49ff.

⁶¹ Bainton, *The Reformation*, p. 61.

⁶² Luther was not opposed to good works at all, seeing them as the result, not the precursor of God’s grace.

⁶³ Those who did not grow up in this environment, cannot imagine how blanketing it was. Even to buy a new stained glass window for the church, were it to be accompanied by a suggestion that God might approve of the “improvement” of the sanctuary was sure to earn the rebuke of “works righteousness.”

The concept of the “canon within the canon” of “what proclaims Christ” will not immediately tell us what behavior is and is not valid. To be sure, we could simply try it for 40 or 50 years: Preach the cross and God’s gift and see if those homosexuals who hear us change their lifestyle. If they don’t, then that would have to count as evidence in favor of homosexuality. To state such a thought experiment is to risk being accused of writing satire. However, observing how people, in particular, homosexuals, behave when confronted with the gospel is important. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

The rejection of inerrancy

In previous parts of this chapter we’ve seen how the Reformers removed other sources of authority to put the Bible above everything else. That would seem to lead directly to a doctrine of inerrancy or infallibility for the Bible. But as the immediately previous section showed, the reformers placed an aspect of the Bible (“what proclaims Christ”) above the text itself.

Luther was quite free to judge portions of scripture that did not meet this criterion. He wrote prefaces⁶⁴ for each book of the Bible for his German translation and they have many statements incompatible with an infallible attitude to scripture. He felt free to rank the books, regarding the Gospel of John and St. Paul’s letters (especially Romans) as the “true kernel and marrow of all the books. Jude was valued, but “need not be counted among the chief books,” James was “an epistle of straw.. for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it,” though Luther recommended it be read.

In other writings he thought Kings more reliable than Chronicles, objected to Ester being in the Bible at all, disagreed with Hebrews 6:4 and Acts 15:29 and could complain about Revelation, a book not often thought to be “plain” or “clear.”⁶⁵

So, while he thought scripture could be “clear” at least in its overall subject matter, it could be very tangled in the specifics. What proclaimed Christ was infallible, but not so every word in the Bible. If Lutherans are uneasy about the opinions expressed thus far on the infallibility of scripture, it is the beginning of awareness that we have forgotten our heritage. Fundamentalism is not a Lutheran perspective.

But this is not at all due to Luther neglecting or not caring about Scripture. English translations of his commentaries on scripture fill 30 volumes. “No modern exegete [one who interprets scripture] can fail to be moved by the depth of the Reformer’s insights into the meaning of the Biblical text. Next to his exegesis most present-day commentaries seem either pedantic or shallow or both.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Luther, “Prefaces.” Quotes from pages 362, 398, 362,

⁶⁵ See Harrisville & Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, at p. 15, and “The Bible in the Reformation” for examples.

⁶⁶ Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, p. 255.

D. What the radical Reformation added: Reason and the Spirit

If tradition is rejected, and all can interpret according to their own ideas, doesn't that open the doors to chaos? How can we avoid a radical sort of individualism where each person is their own Pope? So far we have considered the Reformation against the existing tradition. But there also was a radical reformation that put itself against Luther and other moderate reformers. This radical reformation caused Luther and others to reflect on these questions.

It was easy to proclaim that the average faithful Christian, led by the Holy Spirit, reading this "plain" and "clear" Bible, would infallibly come to the right understanding of scripture "in the stillness of the individual before the Word"⁶⁷. One can even imagine a thoughtful individual maturing in his or her awareness of this over time, and coming to some sense of when these factors are operating.

However, this pleasant picture could not survive the Reformation, as Luther found that all groups, Catholic, moderate and radical reformers claimed to have the Spirit.⁶⁸ If the Catholic Church had wanted an interpretation based only on external sources, and the Lutheran view was "Word and Spirit" together, the Anabaptists and other radical reformers wanted to rely on the Spirit alone.⁶⁹

In the radical reformation and in debates among faithful Christians down through the years, a total reliance on "the Spirit" yields some of the worst fanaticism, schism and violence. There is no outward sign of when someone else is under the power of the Holy Spirit. Faithful people can become hyper-faithful fanatics. Again, as suggested in the introduction to this paper, if the group of faithful must make a decision about the collective's policy, some form of collective decision-making is required. The Lutheran "moderate reform" position would lead us to look for something the community of the faithful could use to come to a collective decision. What would this be?

Reason

What we are left with is reason, and its associated sciences of what constitutes evidence, what proves a fact and what is a valid argument. Perhaps Melancthon and his use of rhetorical analysis on Romans should be cited as an early attempt to explore this possibility for Biblical interpretation.⁷⁰

Reason, as a technique for reaching agreement is under sustained attack today from two directions. On the one hand, the church, perhaps even more than contemporary American society, is deeply suspicious of reason. Reason is assumed to be opposed to the heart, and it is

⁶⁷ Reid, *The Authority of Scripture*, p. 71.

⁶⁸ Schreiner, "The Spiritual Man Judges All Things."

⁶⁹ Reid, p. 60.

⁷⁰ Timothy Wengert, "Philip Melancthon's 1522 Annotations". Reid, *The Authority of Scripture*, p. 79.

commonly believed that reason is rationalization, cold and unfeeling, which leads to all manner of evils. Against this is the heart, feeling, caring, love and all that is warm and reassuring.

The history of this curious view is beyond the scope of this paper. To be sure, reason's disciples are not infallible: we have all encountered reason as a disguise for naked self-interest. We have all emerged dizzy from an encounter with the hyper-logical person who "proves" to us that UFO's have abducted millions or that Watergate was a deliberate plan by President Nixon to get us to think for ourselves.⁷¹ What is not noticed in contemporary society is that feeling and caring are equally effective covers for self-interest. Perhaps it is an even more effective cover since any attempt to expose the self-interest can be rejected as "unfeeling." A stance of caring and appeals to emotion are staples of advertising, political persuasion and other forms of propaganda.

The choice, however, is not between reason and feeling, both of which can be distorted in the service of sin or be sources of inspiration. There is an ancient spiritual phrase, "the head in the heart," which suggests that the issue is to use both logic and emotion as checks and support for each other. In the realm of theology, the parallel phrase might be "faith seeking understanding," which suggests a union of logic and devotion.

A second attack on reason comes from the entire complex of postmodern deconstructive hermeneutics that contend that objectivity and the idea of one correct interpretation are illusions. Again, a full discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. To some extent, popular advocacy of deconstruction is attacking a straw man. They have destroyed a monster of iron objectivity and scientific exegesis that never in fact existed. That more than one interpretation is possible does not mean that all conceivable interpretations are equally valid.⁷²

In deed, attacks on logic have turned things inside out. The point of the traditional "scientific method," (one form of logical argument) was not to privilege my reasoning above others, but exactly the opposite: a way of *subjecting* my analysis and conclusions to review by others for correction.

That arguments and discussion take place about interpretation does not mean that there is no common currency in the debate. For the purposes of this paper, I assume not that we can use mathematical logic to derive one correct answer but that a public discussion with shared criteria is possible.

What reason offers are criteria outside of ourselves. An appeal to reason is an appeal to shared criteria of judgment about what is or is not valid. While attacks on this model are motivated, in part, by a critique of how those with power have used reason to sustain their power, it is in fact true that in the absence of a shared language of debate, what is left is the use of power to decide issues.

Reason: another external system?

⁷¹ An experience of the author.

⁷² Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture*, pp. 48-55. VanHoozer, *Is there a meaning in this text?*

In pointing to reason, are we introducing another external system and depriving scripture of its primacy? No, reason is the minimum external means needed to simply absorb what this complicated, extensive, deep, subtle text is trying to communicate. Reason is not a set of conclusions about the text, but a set of processes for assessing the text. Do you have evidence for this? Are your conclusions consistent? Have you considered all the texts? Have you looked at the language, culture and view of those who wrote it? Have you considered ways of analysis that have proven fruitful on other passages? Have you looked at what others say? Reason is a way of being careful with the text and a way of allowing others to critique and correct your own views.

What is fatal, is to base faith on reason, removed from the authority of the text. That leads to hair-splitting canon law or to atheism. Luther certainly viewed reason as having limits.⁷³ This use of reason occurs after one has accepted the text and what it proclaims.

The use of reason is not foreign to the text itself. Isaiah invites it and the wisdom tradition holds it up as worthy of the believer's efforts. The *logos* of John implies that intellect is at the foundation of the Trinity, and describes Jesus, in part, as "the truth," Corinthians urges us to adult thought.⁷⁴

The reasoning of the Spirit led

Perhaps we should not abandon so quickly the notion of God inspiring Christians. Reading scripture with devotion as well as scholarship can happen. Using reason and the spirit together is similar to the traditional spiritual virtue of "discernment." The best reasoning about scripture comes from those who read it with love and care.

This is not a rejection of scholarship and its program of historical critical analysis by observers whose religious commitment to the text is not discussed. Rather it is a message directed at those inside the faith. If you are a Christian, and seek, as a Christian, to discover what God is communicating through the human artifact of the text, it is better to do that with a spiritual practice of prayer and devotion.

The reasoning of the faithful

In the realm of Biblical interpretation then, we might look to the faithful's use of reason. That is, the exegesis, the interpretation, of those who are members of the church. This does not exclude the contributions of those outside the group – who can put forth reasons for why the faithful have gone off the track, but it does mean that the group will decide what those contributions mean for its own deliberation.

⁷³ Ebeling, *Luther*, p. 230-231.

⁷⁴ Isaiah 1:18; Proverbs 1:1-5; John 1:1-18; 14:6; 1 Corinthians 14:10.

E. Guidelines for interpretation

What then can we say of using this heritage in constructing Biblical interpretation? From the discussion above, certain principles are suggested that might be animated by a Reformation hermeneutic of scripture, though not exclusive to it.

The Bible is the highest authority; the source and norm of our decisions.

This mandates the seriousness with which we must take what is written. From this principle flow several corollaries:

- **The Bible should not be subject to external theological, philosophical, sociological or scientific systems in order to be understood.** This confirms our rejection of various false ways of getting around the prohibitions on homosexuality.
- **Interpretations arising out of a deep, devotional, reading of the Bible should be preferred.** If Scripture is a higher authority for religious questions than science, psychology or sociology, then religious approaches and techniques should be given preference when we read Scripture. There is no way to guarantee the presence of the Holy Spirit, but in the environment of deep reading, and one of devotion, these are more likely to come to the fore.

I am referring here not simply to praying scripture, as opposed to studying it. I mean study and prayer, by methods either formal (such as *Lexio divina*) or informal. I also mean this technique employed over time. We simply must commit to letting ourselves be shaped by a lifetime of reading and pondering the scripture, within the church and within a life of faith. The notion of a detached exegete is a modern idea; the patristic authors were theologians and mystics both.

- **The highest reading of a passage is more likely to be correct.** By “highest reading”, I mean the one that is most moral, more consistent with the highest view of God, etc. Thus if the choice for interpreting the Levitical laws on kosher food is a choice between an assumption that the ancients didn’t understand modern hygiene or assuming that these laws assisted spiritual life, the latter has the presumption in the debate. If this seems “unfair,” consider the extent to which we have privileged the lower or most reductionistic explanation in much Biblical exegesis.
- **We can construct theology from the text.** It is fashionable now to talk of separate, disparate views within scripture. This is certainly progress over flattening out the entire text into a uniform whole. However, if we will not get our theology from outside the text, we must get it from within the text.

Each generation is permitted to interpret the Bible anew

The interpretation of scripture is open to each generation of the church and to all believers. If scripture is open to all, it is open to all of every generation. There is no infallible tradition of any church. Out of humility and awareness that we are not the only generation or group of believers who has existed, we cannot simply brush off the heritage of the church as irrelevant. But we can judge that heritage in the light of scripture.

There is a near universal rejection of homosexuality in the church's tradition. Do we have to accept that? This rejection is not normative for us, except that we are bound to consider how that rejection was or was not rooted in scripture. In humility, we consider the tradition carefully. But we are not blasphemers if we find flaws in tradition, or suggest a correction.

Relationship with God is a primary concern

Note the grammatical inconsistency of this title: logically there is only one primary concern. However, the Bible communicates on many dimensions and I only wish to claim that the Bible consistently raises our relationship with God to a high level of importance.

Of more value for our guidance on homosexuality is the direction that this gospel criteria points to. If the focus of the Bible, and indeed, the Christian religion is on proclaiming something wonderful about God's love and God's plan to save humans, then one conclusion is that passages from the Bible that, on first glance, suggest that God is vicious, petty, power-mad, or intending on dooming humans need to be corrected by being read against a larger context.

To be sure, God's creation of the gospel is based on God's concern that there is something wrong with human life: sin. Thus, those passages in the Bible dealing with God's holiness and God's judgment on sin cannot be waved away. The "canon within the canon" implicitly accepts them.

These points suggest another principle: Any law God lays down has to be in our real, best interest. Such laws are not likely to always be for our immediate benefit, or for any benefit we see when obsessed with some spiritual disease, but definitely for our benefit. The analogy would be to the decisions a good parent makes for a small child: these decisions are always in the best interest of the child, but the child is not always aware of that.

The canon within the canon does provide a valuable way of framing moral choices. The thrust of the Bible is about human distance from God, and God's actions to bring people back to God. The gospel gives priority to human standing with God, our "getting right" with God. It condemns human behavior that distances people from God. This suggests that moral choices are not about humans by themselves, or even only about humans with each other. Moral choices, correct behavior, what is sin and what is not sin, has to do with humans and their God. Moral

choices are certainly about humans with each other but not *only* about humans with each other. The connection is that treating your neighbor poorly distances you from God.

Nor is this simply a new idea with Jesus. Consider the Ten Commandments, or even the bulk of the holiness code itself. While it includes ritual laws, the majority of it is about human treatment of the neighbor and the stranger. The consistent testimony of scripture is that God is very concerned about how you treat your neighbor. Human sin with each other has always been an issue in human relationship with God.

The text must not be read as a book of laws. The point of scripture is to show God's plan for human salvation, how God intends to restore the broken human relationship with God. That includes the correct behavior of humans, but the text is not intended to describe exhaustively all prohibited behaviors.

Moral behavior is judged according to how it affects the relationship with God. From the insight that the key to scripture is the proclamation of God's gracious plan for humans, we derived that what scripture says about morality is shaped by this issue. As we will propose in the next chapter, Jesus will make that link by what he declares are the two key commandments.

We should now introduce the word sin. Sin is actions that break relationships with God and the neighbor. When defining sin, Philip Melancthon includes violations of the Law, and the "immense weakness with which we are born which is called original sin." But he also includes this list:

... darkness and doubting whether God cares about human affairs, whether he punishes, whether he nourishes, whether he aids, and whether he grants people's prayers, are not trivial evils. Likewise, to lack fear and love for God; to love ourselves while neglecting the love of God; to admire our own wisdom; to play with opinions which flee from God ... to have impulses that wander about here and there, turned away from God, and fighting against the Law of God; these things are very great evils, as shown by the punishments.⁷⁵

This way of defining sin moves us far beyond defining sin as breaking the ten commandments, though it includes such moral laws.

Scripture's authority is in the book as a whole, not in individual verses.

The text must not be viewed as inerrant or infallible. From the previous section, it should be obvious that our Reformation perspective simply does not include this view. While parts of Lutheranism have held it, and many Christians feel vaguely like that they should hold it, it is not a requirement. Inerrancy cannot survive a reason-led examination of the text. The text itself testifies against such a view.

⁷⁵ Philip Melancthon, *Commentary on Romans*, p.24-5.

The reading of the entire Bible is required for understanding parts of it. While a century of atomistic exegesis has taught us that good analysis consists of the deconstruction of the text into fragments, our commitment to the whole of scripture would I think, demand that we read the entire book as a control on reading individual verses of it. Not because it is all the same, but because its topic is so removed from our secular lives that we must work to enter the world of the text before understanding any part of it.

We are to use our reason to find the meaning of scripture.

We are to reason about scripture. The full set of historical critical methods are allowed. The full set of techniques about logic are allowed. The arguments made about scripture are public, and subject to scrutiny of the faithful. There are no appeals to the authority of seminary professors, church officials or pastors. We respect the authority of such figures, but we do so not because of their position or person, but because of their actions: we see them reasoning, and see their knowledge of scripture and their awareness of the center and purpose of scripture.

Reasoning about scripture tells us several things:

- **The Bible communicates by means of metaphor, poetry, suggestive examples, vivid illustrations, the symbolic and the full range of persuasive rhetorical techniques.** In a seminary class, we were considering a passage that included “your young men will... and your old men will...” A student objected, and not because it omitted women. No, this was “unfair discrimination” against middle-aged people. If the Bible is a law book, then she is right. If this verse is poetry, then she missed the point. In reading the bible on homosexuality, errors of exegesis are committed that, while accepted, are identical in nature to the one this student committed. This nature of the Bible means that techniques of literary analysis, not simply parsing of sentences, are crucial to comprehending its meaning.
- **The passages of the Bible are written at various times, to various groups and making various assumptions about context.** Verses are not all immediately addressed to 21st century, western Christians.

From all of these principles, we are able to conclude that:

- It is permissible to read one text in the context of larger themes.
- It is permissible to diminish the importance of one text relative to other texts.
- It is permissible to reject certain texts, as mandated by other texts.

F. Are Reformation hermeneutics normative?

In a word, no. Certainly it is not suggested that this approach can be privileged, even within the Lutheran denomination. Rather, I am arguing that this cluster of interpretive methods has power for resolving a series of difficult questions and achieving consensus, a power other methods cannot achieve. There are multitudes of approaches to the Bible, of course, but many can be grouped into broad categories. The fundamentalist approach is riddled with logical inconsistencies. Methods that do not place the Bible as normative lack power to sustain spiritual life. This Lutheran or Reformation hermeneutic is advanced as a middle way.

There are difficulties with this that should be acknowledged. The reformers were not totally consistent in applying their own principles, and did find passages that worked against their views. Also, while terming it a “Lutheran hermeneutic” or “Reformation hermeneutic, it must be at once admitted that the Lutheran churches turned their back on it almost within a generation of the Reformation. Interpretative methods hardened into a Lutheran orthodoxy or Lutheran scholasticism that would simply substitute proof-texting of the reformers or the reformation era confessions for proof-texting the patristic authors or church councils.⁷⁶ In this era, the distinction between the Word of God and the text of the scripture that the Reformation had drawn was collapsed and the position that scripture was inerrant took hold. Along with that position came the sort of rigidity that characterizes all fundamentalist movements. “Sharp argumentation against other positions, quick identification of an enemy, and controversy in general belong to the era of Lutheran Orthodoxy.”⁷⁷

Likewise, it must also be acknowledged that this approach to scripture drew on many contributions made by those that came before the reformers, setting the intellectual groundwork, and in many cases, giving their lives without fame or being remembered.⁷⁸ Luther and others of his day did not operate out of a vacuum nor were they the first to make these points.

Advancing this hermeneutic and offering it for those who are not Lutheran or from a church associated with this moderate reformation is in no sense a claim of superiority for the church I belong to.

A word must also be said, in fairness, to those opposed to homosexuality. Full disclosure demands I warn you to review these principles and the arguments for them. For once these principles are accepted as the means by which we should look at scripture, the decision to accept homosexuality, or more precisely, to deny that homosexuality is in and of itself a sin, comes almost automatically. From here on, the burden of proof in the debate has shifted.

⁷⁶ Certainly, my mild critique of the Lutheran position on sanctification will be regarded as near-blasphemous by some Lutherans, who hold Reformation theology equal to scripture.

⁷⁷ Gritsch, *History of Lutheranism*, p. 126. Bainton, *The Reformation*, p. 44-45. Harrisville, *Bible in Modern Culture*, p. 22-23.

⁷⁸ Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, p.307-322.

7. What is sin?

A. Introduction

What do we want to know?

We have a question to pose to the Bible, we want to know what it says about homosexuality. We want to know if this behavior is one God objects to or accepts. That can be a question about the law, or it can also be framed as a question about sin, the term for disobeying God's commands to us.

How will we find the answer?

Let's remind ourselves of the principles we put forward in the last chapter:

- The Bible is the highest authority; the source and norm of our decisions.
- Each generation is permitted to interpret the Bible anew
- Relationship with God is a primary concern
- Scripture's authority is in the book as a whole, not in individual verses.
- We are to use our reason to find the meaning of scripture.

From these we know that we must ask more than just a question about homosexuality. We have to ask how the Bible defines sin.

B. What does the Bible say about sin, the law, and correct behavior?

The correct answer to this question would be to read the entire Bible with this thought in mind. A second choice, one that is more practical, is to look at those texts in the Bible that seem to focus on the law.

I have selected texts that seem to do that. This list is subjective, of course, but not arbitrary. Certain texts seem to be talking not about one particular law, but about "law" as a category. Some texts seem to be giving insight into the purpose, the point, the larger themes of the law and what is sin. In the length of this study it is not possible to do a detailed study of each text. However, it is worth reading them all slowly and thinking about what they are trying to communicate.

None of the "official" passages about homosexuality appear on the list. I avoid them deliberately, because if we focus first on those passages, we seldom focus on anything else.

Further, by examining only those passages we contradict our principles of interpretation by implicitly proceeding as if the Bible was a collection of moral laws, and that all one had to do was simply look up the correct subject in the index and find "the answer," without worrying about any other passages. A procedure that only examines a few verses violates the principle that we should consider the entire sweep of scripture.

The typical approach of exegesis on this issue, of only examining the few Bible texts on homosexuality or sexuality, is in fact, the unfair approach. It rigs the outcome by assuming the "law book" hermeneutic. It is also an invalid procedure because it excludes the possibility of these proof texts being interpreted by other scriptural texts.

The texts.

Exodus 20:1-17 (Deuteronomy 5:6-21): (The Ten Commandments)

Two of the ten are about sexual issues. Both adultery and covetousness involve breaking promises and using or taking from others.

Deuteronomy 10:12-13: "So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being."

This text is addressed to Israel, other texts below (from Jesus) will justify our applying this text to ourselves. It summarizes the law and the purpose of it.

Isaiah 1:16-17: "cease to do evil, ¹⁷learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Not merely private acts of being "good" are required, but affirmative acts in support of others.

Micah 6:8: He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Justly celebrated as a key text, stating the requirements of God in thematic, affirmative ways.

Matthew 5-7: The Sermon on the Mount

A longer passage, long pointed to as a summary of the teachings of Jesus. God is concerned with more than exterior obedience, but also the interior of the person, thoughts, intentions, feeling. The standard is perfection.

Matthew 23:23-28 (Luke 11:39): "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others ... ²⁸So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness....

The text also warns us against a particular type of mistake – worrying about small violations of the law and ignoring large violations.

Matthew 25:31-46, The sheep and the goats: "³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food ... ⁴⁰Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'...

The treatment of the poor is of first concern to God.

Mark 2:23-3:8 (Matthew 12:1-14, Luke 6:1-5): "²⁷"The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath"

The purpose of God's laws is for our benefit.

Mark 7:17-23 (Matthew 15:10-20): "... ²⁰It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

It is not the breaking of external taboos, but doing evil things that break God's will.

Mark 10:17-22 (Matthew 19:16-23, Luke 18:18-23): The rich young ruler.

His point of disobedience was money. Contrast with the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2ff) where money is not the person's disobedience.

Mark 12:15-8 (Matthew 22:15-22, Luke 20:20-6): "...Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were utterly amazed at him."

How can we apply this rule without deep discussion about what it means?

Mark 12:28-34 (Matthew 22:34-40, Luke 10:25-8): "...he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" ²⁹Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' ³¹The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³²Then the scribe said to him, "... this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." ³⁴When Jesus

saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question."

This text allows us to claim continuity between Old and New Testaments about the core of God's law.

John 13:34- 35: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Romans 3:19-20: "Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰For "no human being will be justified in his sight" by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin."

Romans 6:1-2: "What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?"

There are moral choices. Not everything is acceptable.

I Corinthians 6:12-13 (10:23-4): "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything. ¹³"Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food," and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body."

Law directs us to our true, god-given purpose.

Galatians 5:13-6:2: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

I Thessalonians 4:1-12: "... ³For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; ⁴that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, ⁵not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter ..."

1 Timothy 4:1-5: "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, ²through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron. ³They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving..."

Hebrews 4:12: "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

James 1:27: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

James 4:1-6: "Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ²You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask.

³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures."

I John 3:4: "Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness (*ἀνομίαν*, anomian); sin is lawlessness."

I John 5:17: "All wrongdoing (*ἀδικία*, adika) is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal (*θάνατοῦ*, thanaton)."

C. What do these texts tell us about sin?

In this section I will give a series of observations or conclusions drawn from these texts and other texts parallel or supportive of these key texts.

Observation 1: The Bible does not list all behaviors that are or are not sins.

This conclusion comes from observing what kinds of material are in the Bible, especially the New Testament. The Bible does not devote most of its text to discussing which behaviors are and are not sins. The focus of the Gospels and Acts, and some of the letters is Jesus (who he is, what he does, his relationship to God, how he dies, his resurrection), and not just the implications of the rules Jesus offered.

The letters are different, but they also are situational writings, not systematic treatises, which means, at a minimum, that we have to understand the words about sin in their context before we can appropriate the texts. The more systematic treatises (Romans, Hebrews) are concerned with the nature and role of Jesus (primarily), not a systematic analysis of proper behavior. In short, the subject of the New Testament seems to be Jesus and not the quirks of human life generally. When we look at the selected texts in the previous section, we observe some interesting patterns.

1a. The New Testament assumes you already know what is good and evil.

The Bible seems to assume a preexisting knowledge of what is right: "do good, shun evil." (I Theses. 4:1-12, James 4:7-10). Sometimes these exhortations touch on the content of obedience (Gal. 5:13-6:2), but that almost seems accidental or by way of illustration only. The main issue seems to be how to help you live up to what you already know you should do or to overcome your despair at not doing the right thing (in other words: to offer salvation).

1b. The New Testament offers general principles, not list of rules

Jesus typically preaches in terms of sayings or parables, not a list of rules. The sayings are deep, not legalistic, and their exact meaning has been debated for centuries. A list of these would include:

- Mark 7:17-23: "what comes from the inside defiles"
- Mark 12:28-34: "love God and love your neighbor"
- Matt. 5:3-12: the beatitudes
- Matt. 5:13: "you are the salt of the earth"
- Matt. 6:21: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."
- Matt 7:7-11: "Ask and it will be given you"
- Matt 7:12: the golden rule
- Mark 12:5-8: "render unto Caesar"
- Luke 9:23-4: "deny yourself and take up your cross"
- Luke 10:9: "the Kingdom of God has come near you"
- John 6:35: "I am the bread of life"
- John 14:1-6: "I am the way, the truth and the life"

1c. The New Testament offers examples of good living, not rules.

When pointers to good living are needed, Jesus tends to tell stories rather than give laws (Luke 10:25-37: the Good Samaritan, as paradigmatic example, and also the various "the Kingdom of God is like," parables). Jesus' habit of teaching in parables has been interpreted as being a refutation of thinking, as if the warm fuzzy feeling you got from a parable was better than an idea. I think the reason for parables is that the ideas of a story are less subject to reductionism and legalism than if they were stated in rule form. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a more profound way of teaching about love of neighbor (for example) than a verse that said "never pass strangers who are in trouble" would.

1d. The New Testament is not primarily a book of spiritual advice.

Throughout Christian history, people have written books of spiritual advice such as the *Philokalia* in the early church or the *Imitation of Christ* from the Medieval church. The Bible is not like those books which analyze, for example, how to live without your emotions being out of control, discuss the various deadly sins, discuss stages of spiritual progress, and give specific advice. There is very little of this in the Bible.⁷⁹

Observation 1 applied to homosexuality.

The Bible is not systematic on moral or sexual issues: as people have noted, in the area of sex, there is nothing on bestiality, group sex, pornography, sex involving children, etc.

If you know what is a sin and what is not, the Bible tells you specifically how to deal with others who sin against you and how to deal with your own sin. It does not really tell us in a systematic way *by an encyclopedia of laws* what is sinful and what is not. It certainly does not give us a complete list of actions that are sinful. We cannot expect therefore, that the Bible will *necessarily* tell us exactly what to think about homosexuality by a direct command. Of course

⁷⁹ Exceptions would include the letter of James.

the Bible does have some illustrative cases. "Lusting after a woman in your heart." Nothing is said about lusting after men. Would any of us think that absence meant that it was acceptable?

This I think, is not a dismissal of the Bible, but rather to read it with utter seriousness: I assume the form of the Bible is as determinative of its meaning as its content. If the form is an almost steadfast refusal to be pinned down to legalistic rules, why are we so anxious to convert it to a series of legalistic rules? If the Bible tends to refuse to define morality as the observance of a list of rules, why is that the question we always put to the Bible?

This first observation has found support for our hermeneutical principles from Biblical texts.

Observation 2: The Bible addresses individuals, calling them choose good behavior and reject sin.

Observation 1 does not mean that the Bible is unconcerned about proper behavior. There is quite a long series of texts indicating that choices do exist, and must be addressed by each person.

2a. There is good behavior and there is sin and evil.

Some Bible passages exhort us to do good, (Mark 12:28-34, Romans 6, I Theses. 4:1-12) and others speak of the existence of moral choices (Matt. 7:24-7, Gal. 5:13-6:2), and call us to make that choice. Evil does exist; the human situation is not just bad communications or a reaction to childhood trauma (Matt. 5:1-9, Mark 7:7-13). The choices humans make have consequences, because God judges these choices (Matt. 7:15-20, Matt. 23:23-8, Matt 25:31-46).

Despite a human fondness for shades of gray, the Bible is fairly consistent at offering a stark choice between good and evil.

2b. Godly life does involve our behavior.

This seemingly obvious corollary is simply another blow against Lutheran extremism on grace, that tends to imply that sanctification is some sort of evil that limits God's action. Again such passages as Mark 10:17-23; Matt. 7:21; Matt 25:31-46; Mark 10:17-23, and the whole book of James are relevant here.

2c. The choice of good and evil is put to each individual

It is common to say that there are "no solitary Christians" or to emphasize that Christianity is a religion of relationships and that the early texts were read in a community. However, when we examine the form of texts that give moral choices, or moral exhortations, I find that the majority of these texts are read most naturally as being addressed to individuals, and present moral choices as an individual choice. Almost all of our listed texts apply. There is little in the New Testament from the perspective of a nation, let alone a nation state, or from the perspective of the tribe or region. (The Old Testament talks about the "nations," but when it describes morals it has as much about the solitary "stranger" in Israel's midst as it does about rules for dealing with slaves taken in battle.) There is nothing, I think, on the rights of governments or nations. Even Romans 13 is about how we, as individuals, relate to the government. The Old Testament prophetic tradition aims its barbs at individual leaders as often as at "the nation."

Of course, groups are referred to, either to be attacked for bad moral choices (Pharisees, scribes, lawyers), or as categories to be cared for (widows, those in jail). But it is not suggested that these groups can be rejected because of the worst behavior of its members (as for example, we say that because some gays are promiscuous, it proves that the gay lifestyle is inherently bad).

Matthew 18 is the exception that proves the rule. As just about the only verses that assume that moral choices involve group process, it is quoted extensively, perhaps to our detriment since it takes this exceptional verse and assumes that it is the rule. There are also verses about the qualifications of church leaders, but these are also addressed largely to individuals, talking about how the individual should regard leaders and the qualifications of individuals to be leaders. Again, moral decisions do not seem to involve group process. I Corinthians is a major exception here, being consciously addressed to a self-defined group and dealing with divisions within the church. Thus, while there are significant exceptions, the primary mode of address is to individuals.

2d. The Bible directs us to our own sins, not our concern for the sins of others.

The exhortations on sin are seldom about our need to control or defeat the sins others are committing. "Turn the other cheek" hardly leaves much room for various uses of the law. Matthew 7:1-4 (take out the log) is the key text (also see Galatians 6:1). Even the dreaded 5th chapter of Ephesians is consistently written in terms of the things YOU owe your neighbor, and has not one word about what you can demand from your neighbor.

The only possible exception to this that I can see is the Old Testament prophetic attack on the wealthy and powerful as a group. Yet, that same document admits the existence of good kings, so even here it isn't the group you belong to as the unjust behavior that is being attacked.

This single-minded Biblical focus on the solitary person standing before God is perhaps the hardest, most bitter aspect of the Bible for us to swallow. We think we're basically OK, but there is serious sin somewhere else. In all my years of leading Bible studies, I have never once, never once, succeeded in getting a group to examine its own sins.

In this aspect, as in so much, the Bible is wise. There is a parallel to modern psychological insights about change: you can only change your own behavior.

Observation 2 applied to homosexuality

Having decided that there is indeed a choice between good and evil, some might immediately jump to the conclusion that these passages prove the sexual law of marital fidelity and celibate singleness with gays left in the dark, but that jumps the conclusion. As yet, nothing about specific sexual rules have been determined.

This observation certainly does refute certain forms of arguments offered in favor of a generic "acceptance" of homosexuality that see freedom as an unlimited good. The unintended legacy of the 60s often leads us to construct moral arguments with "freedom" or "self-expression" and

"self-growth" as absolute virtues (forgetting the context of moral repression those arguments were a reaction against, a context that no longer exists).

Any real argument *for* homosexuality must recognize that there are some things we have to be *against*. Any defense of the virtues possible in a homosexual life must recognize that not all behaviors are virtuous. This is both required for its own sake and as an effective means to reach consensus. Many reluctant to accept gays do so out of a concern, misplaced or not, with the decline in morality generally in society. Such people fear that acceptance of homosexuality is just another step towards total lawlessness. When they hear advocates speak of "homosexuals" as a group, without any notion of a spectrum of behaviors within the group, then there is a tendency (aided by the mass media) to assume that the extreme forms of lawlessness are typical of the group as a whole.

Gays also have a stake in this argument, for they do not seek acceptance as just another crazy quirk to be indulged in; Christian gays seek acceptance of the possibility of holiness in a life of being gay and not celibate. The argument that "well, we all sin, so let's take gays too," is not a friendly one to homosexuals or to those who take the biblical commands of holiness seriously.

The Biblical focus on one's own sin suggests that the most important aspect of the process of the debate on homosexuality is not what straights demand from gays, nor what gays say to justify themselves, but what gays say about sin within the homosexual lifestyle. As heterosexuals, what we should focus on is to assess how we see gays addressing the temptations to sin in their lives. Do we hear gays calling for their brothers and sisters to lead a godly life as a gay person, or do we hear calls for self-indulgence? Are they attacking narcissism and consumerism in the gay lifestyle or defending it?

Of course, it could be said that in a "climate of judgment," it is unrealistic to expect this sort of vulnerability in public by gays. They wouldn't want to provide ammunition to their opponents. This is a weak argument. If gay people talking of transformation within their own lives, calling for a godly life and visibly leading a godly life in the church does not receive acknowledgment, why would gay people want to be a part of such a church anyway? Those who are rabidly opposed to gays are not listening to anything. Those who care first about God and godly living are the ones who will listen.

The same standards apply to those opposed to homosexuality. The primary task of assessing sin is to assess their own sin. Rather than being obsessed with the sins of others they are called to assess their own sins. They are certainly permitted to voice their opposition to sin but being vitriolically anti-gay is hardly following the Biblical mandates of how to treat the sin of others.

This is no small matter, nor a simple debating point. I've been at a "discussion" of homosexuality⁸⁰ where the air was so thick with hatred that I am fairly certain that the reason the openly gay speaker was not taken out and burned at the stake had more to do with cultural conventions than the self-control of the heterosexuals in attendance. Is not the Bible crystal clear

⁸⁰ An ELCA synod convention in the late 80's.

that filling your heart with venom, stirring the passions of hatred, and spewing extreme words are sins?

Try to imagine a much different public debate: the gays stand up and talk about their struggle with sin in various aspects of their lives. The straights do likewise. The gays acknowledge the struggle of straights to live godly lives. The straights do likewise. Mutual insights are shared, the parallels and contrasts noted. There is some gentle inquiry about how sin and the struggle against it is engaged in other's lives. All leave enlightened. Of course, such a proposal will be universally dismissed as "naive" and not cognizant of political realities. I disagree: true naiveté is assuming that anything but bitterness, self-justification and stalemate will come from a debate where gays think the only sin is not to openly affirm your homosexuality, and anti-gays think the only sin is to be gay.

Nor does the persecution of homosexuals by some in the church excuse homosexual Christians from serious self-examination. The bankruptcy of much of the debate on homosexuality is revealed by this: there has been little or no public discussion of what sin is after you understand yourself to be gay.

Observation 3: Sin cannot be defined by examining Old Testament Law.

While the New Testament does not throw away the concept of Law, it does reject the applicability of the detailed, specific rules of the Old Testament Law. This is another reason why a neglect of Old Testament texts does not prove fatal to our argument.

3a. The New Testament is not very concerned with the Old Testament Law.

We should look again at Mark 7 and parallels; it is a rather breathtakingly offhanded way to toss aside the food regulations of the Old Testament. Most of the Levitical code is not debated or even referred to in the New Testament. The major New Testament discussion of the code, the book of Hebrews, is devoted to proving that the sacrificial system has been abolished!

Passages such as Matthew 5:17-9 affirm the law generally, but given the contrary passages of Mark 7, and the verses later in Matthew 5 that intensify various laws, it seems that we cannot read 5:17-9 as any sort of simple affirmation of the specific rules of the Levitical code.

In short, note what is missing: nowhere in the New Testament are the specific Levitical laws debated (like they are in rabbinic Judaism). The New Testament is not a Mishnah or a Talmud. The New Testament points in a different direction. It must be said that this is not intended to imply that Judaism, then or now, thought holiness came via external observance of the law. Thus, our argument, rather than attacking a straw man of legalistic Judaism, is in continuity with a key strand of Judaism.

3b. The New Testament rejects the concept that obeying Old Testament rules is sufficient for morality.

The passage of Mark 7:7-13 seems an explicit rejection of the sufficiency of the code. Likewise the various Sabbath controversies (Mark 2:23-8; John 9 among others) also point in that direction, as does the story of the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-22). The law brings the consciousness of sin (Romans 3:19-20) but does not save.

3c. Obeying Old Testament rules can be fraudulent.

There is such a thing as obeying the rules for the wrong reasons (Matt 23:23-8). For example, one can be sexually circumspect for fear of sexually transmitted diseases rather than for commitment. A related example would be a gay couple who have decided to be faithful primarily because of AIDS, and not because of benefits to their relationship with each other and with God.

Would anyone suggest that in the examples given, there was no sin? Would we think that Jesus would not challenge people in those situations?

The law cannot bring holiness. What Jesus surely said is that artificial boundaries about Law cleanly separating good behavior from sinful behavior are an illusion. If "lust in your heart" is a sin, then simply observing the commandments must not be enough to live without sin. Lutheranism should know this. The traditional "law" on marriage, "celibate while single, faithful while married" (and married understood to be heterosexual), is totally inadequate to address the sinfulness of sexuality, even in marriage. Sex can separate two faithful married people. Sex can be used to manipulate, sex can make you feel empty, sex can intimidate, the lack of sex can make you feel guilty, the obsession with sex can distort -- all within a faithful marriage.

It will only get worse. Technology permits two people to go on-line and talk each other through a fantasy of sex with each other. No intercourse has occurred, no Biblical law broken, but would you say there was no possibility of sin? When these encounters enter virtual reality and yield tactile and visual feedback, albeit synthetic and exaggerated, there will still have been no intercourse. Perhaps a man can be represented to his partner as a woman, as well, so you could have homosexual virtual sex between people of two different genders. As these cases spin out the Law looks less and less relevant and Jesus seems more and more discerning: observing the Law will not save us from sin. And as Jesus also observed, keeping the law is sometimes sin as well, when you keep the Sabbath and avoid helping a neighbor in need.

Observation 3 applied to homosexuality.

There is simply no reason to feel a loyalty to the Levitical code or to any code of law as a solution to moral choice. We need a code of conduct, but it's not in Leviticus. We are allowed to disregard provisions of the code as other imperatives of the Bible mandate.

Observation 4: Failure to love God completely is sin.

The command to love God fully comes labeled for us as one of the two key commands. When we think of love in terms of our behavior and moral choices, the word obedience comes to mind. Various New Testament texts tell us of the content of that obedience.

The story of the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-22) seems of profound relevance here. The ruler was not a conventionally disobedient nor impious man, Jesus (as Mark reports) loved him, very high praise. Yet the young man turns away from God sorrowful because Jesus put his finger on the one key point of the ruler's disobedience: money. While this story tells us something about money, it seems to say even more about total obedience: about loving God with all your heart and mind. Jesus did not tell him that we are all sinners and that's OK, but with unerring precision named the source of disobedience.

Other texts (Matthew 5:21-37, Matt 23:23-8, Mark 12:28-34) also point us beyond a surface or partial obedience to God. Likewise, a number of texts in the Sermon on the Mount that tell us to trust God for our livelihood, also urge us to fully depend on God. For example, Matt. 5:29-30 tells us to prefer obeying God to all other habits, even dear ones that we think are part of us. Other texts (Matt 5:11-12, Math 7:21) tell us that part of obedience is confessing God.

It should be clear that staring intently into the demands for total obedience is terrifying. No one can meet this standard. But it is the only standard consistent with an utterly holy God.

4a. Observing the law may be breaking the law.

Obeying the Sabbath law may be breaking a more serious law (Matthew 23:23-28).

4b. The spirit of the law is more important than the letter of the law.

Of all the things that could be said about Jesus and his comments on what is or is not right behavior, surely one would be that he has no patience with surface observance that masks an inner rebellion.

Observation 4 applied to homosexuality.

If obeying God fully is a key aspect of life, then we should ask that question in terms of sexual behavior: Is your sexual behavior impeding your obedience to God? Is your sexual activity drawing you closer to God? Does it seem holy? Is it done out of obedience to God? Can you place the religious and the sexual portions of your life together without shock or embarrassment?

These are difficult questions to answer, of course. We're not used to putting any sexual thoughts in close proximity to religious ones. A history of assuming that sex is somehow "dirty", or at least a "passion" we should suppress⁸¹ complicates our answer. Nonetheless, some thoughts can be offered.

Sometimes it is the denial of sexuality that leads to distance from God. The covering up of sexuality or sexual orientation, lying about who you are (including lying to yourself) leads to

⁸¹ Here it would be worth considering how Christianity came to this view. Especially relevant would be the association of monastic ascetic life as one without sexuality. A comparative study of other religions would also be of use.

areas of your life being put off limits and to a living in denial. This is going to be associated with a distance from God because you cannot bring this part of your life into your prayer life or into your relationship with God.

So, does being homosexual, and living as homosexuals, distance you from God? It may distance you from the church and its anger, but the many Christian gays would testify to another reality.

In the context of this question, Romans 1 is of interest. In Romans 1:18-32, the major New Testament proof text on homosexuality, Paul argues that when people turn their back on God (no longer live in obedience) then they take up sinful practices, of which homosexuality is a prime example. Paul argues in the form of "If A then B": If people turn their back on God, then they will sin (by being homosexual). We note that the logical interpretation of his argument does not establish that all homosexual behavior is the result of disobedience, but rather that those who disobey may exhibit that disobedience by engaging in homosexuality. As a matter of logic if the statement "If A, then B" is known to be valid it does not establish the validity of "If B, then A."

Further, Paul's argument is in the form of a factual claim, he argues that people made a religious decision and it led to observable behavior. Therefore we can examine life and see if it agrees with Paul's claim. If we encounter gay people who are obedient to God, and obedient in the realm of sexuality as described above, then it seems as if they are not an example of Paul's argument.

Some homosexual behavior might fall under Paul's condemnation. A person might engage in homosexuality out of trendiness, to be daring, to seek self-destruction or to spite the church or family. This behavior would be a result of disobedience to God and could be condemned as sin, but it wouldn't refute that there are other homosexuals who are obedient to God, any more than a heterosexual turning from obedience to God to abuse his wife would prove that all heterosexual activity was the result of similar disobedience.

It is important to note here that I am not arguing that Paul is wrong or that this verse should be thrown out of scripture. I'm arguing that the claim Paul makes does not apply to all homosexuals, just to those who engage in homosexual behavior as a direct result of a prior sin.

If this is a hard conclusion to follow or seems like hair-splitting, I'd suggest that this is solely because we are assumed to consider homosexuals as a uniform group but never consider heterosexuals in the same way. We are quite aware of many heterosexual sinful behaviors but never attach that condemnation to all heterosexuals as a group.

Observation 5: Failing to love our neighbor fully is sin.

One key command is to love God, the other to love our neighbor.⁸² What are we to do for our neighbor? It is not a simple question. The texts that urge "loving your neighbor" link it to

⁸² So labeled by Jesus, and echoed by Paul at Gal 5:14.

"loving yourself," an equally deep remark. In James 2:1-8 love of neighbor is connected to not showing favoritism to people on the basis of how much money they have. What can we say about behavior to the neighbor based on our texts?

5a. Our behavior towards our neighbors has a privileged status.

Mark 12:28-34 lifts love of neighbor as one of two key commandments. How we treat our neighbors, and special categories of neighbors that are vulnerable or weak, such as spouse or widows, figure centrally in such texts as: Matthew 5-7, Matt. 25:31-46, I Thessalonians 4:1-12, James 1:27

5b. Helping others sometimes takes precedence over religious observances.

The proper meaning of Sabbath was a key issue, witness such texts as Mark 2:23, Matt. 5:23-4, from our list, and also Luke 14:1-6 and Mark 3:1-7. Perhaps the extensive controversies about food given to idols and circumcision in Paul's letters would apply also.

5c. Being opposed by someone does not cancel our obligations to them.

Matt 5:38-48. If gay people are seen as enemies by some straights, and gay bashers as enemies to gays, then the special way we are to behave to enemies should apply to our behavior. This would involve praying for each other (and not just praying that the other stop doing what we don't like), and should regard turning enemies into friends as the goal.

5d. Loving the neighbor does not mean an avoidance of confrontation.

But whatever obligations we have, even to enemies, apparently does not mean that we cannot oppose behaviors that seem wrong. Consider such texts as Luke 4 (Jesus challenges his home town), Mark 7 (where he deals with the religious establishment), Mark 10:17-22 (where he challenges a righteous man, in total contravention of all rules of "meeting people where they are."), Matt. 23 (The Pharisees are Jesus' neighbors, are they not?) and also Luke 10:37-54.

Other texts can be read in modern terms as a rejection of co-dependence, triangulation, and a concern about what others might think (Matt 15:1-20, Mark 2:23-8).

5e. Obligations to God can take priority over certain family obligations.

While it is common to speak of the texts that show helping taking priority over the Sabbath, we might also consider texts like Mark 3:20-38, Matt. 8:18-22 and Luke 12:49-53 that show Jesus indicating that obligations to God can and do take priority over aspects of our relationships to our closest neighbors, and our family.

5f. Certain uses of sexuality against neighbors are sin.

Several texts speak of how sexuality can exploit others (I Theses. 4:1-12). Sexual sins are included in lists of sins in Mark 7:22 and Galatians 5:19. Other passages such as I Peter 4:3 and II Peter 2:7 condemn a life of dissipation in general and include sexual dissipation specifically.

However, we cannot assume the conclusion that homosexuality is condemned by passages speaking of lawlessness, licentiousness or dissipation. Asserting that these terms include

homosexuality is a circular argument. If homosexuality is indeed illegal, then indulging in it is lawlessness. However, if homosexuality is not illegal, then doing it isn't outside the rules.

What licentiousness does seem to include is an inner degeneracy, a behavior without limits, being driven by passions that are not from God or for our benefit.

Matthew 5:21-37, intensifies common sexual rules, as does Mark 10:2-9 in regard to divorce. We infer from these texts, that sex is a serious business and that sexual relationships have consequences (this would be the import of I Corinthians 6:15-20 as well).

5g. What does loving our neighbor consist of?

Several texts point to aspects of loving our neighbor. I Corinthians 6:12 speaks of what builds up the community and puts us in mind of the old term of "home-wrecker" for those whose behavior does not build up a family. Luke's parable of the Good Samaritan directly says that helping in time of trouble and weakness is being neighborly. Matt 25:31-46 and James 1:27 also point us to offering direct help for physical problems and suffering. Galatians 5:13 seems to point to more general attitudes of how we should help each other.

Observation 5 applied to homosexuality

It appears that we can oppose our neighbor when their behavior is offensive, but not with contempt or hatred (Matt. 18, Luke 18:9-14). The, perhaps unoriginal, story of the woman caught in adultery in John 8 sorts these two out beautifully, as Jesus deflects those accusers with false motives, yet also deflects the woman from her sin. It is amazing that this story is cited for only the first reason as if Jesus refused to take a stand against her behavior.

It also appears that sex is a significant battleground of moral choices involving our neighbor (and our lovers and spouses are certainly our "neighbor"). Since sex is powerful and changes relationships, it can be destructive. One person can be used sexually in a way that does not build them up. Some people, children included, are not at a stage where they can make meaningful choices. Marriage and long-term sexual relationships are then particularly a potent area of sexual power.

This observation leads us to examine the motive for straight people to be so concerned about homosexual behavior? Is the motivation fear, or a real concern for them as individual persons before God? Do we wish their best interests? Is our concern to stop homosexuality in our culture a concern to remove something that we have decided is tearing our families apart or is it projection: looking for something to attack so we don't have to confront our own inability to lead our families?

Concern for the neighbor is opposed to letting them suffer. The Good Samaritan does not teach us that those who walk in a dangerous way deserve the punishment they get, it teaches us to help people in trouble. Certainly we should be able to agree that we would, as a church, stand forthrightly against physical violence against gays, support those who care for those dying of AIDS, and even oppose laws that lump ordinary homosexuals with convicted sex offenders. But,

as important as those positions are, they are peripheral to a straightforward justification of homosexuality.

Observation 6: What is sin can vary from person to person.

The bare statement of this observation probably induces apoplexy in some and worry in others. How could the rules vary from person to person and isn't that "situational ethics" or just an excuse to justify our own behavior?

There is no doubt that the world is full of misery because people decide that rules for others do not apply to them, including people who cheat on their spouses and corporate executives who write pension rules more favorable for themselves than others.

However, notice carefully how Jesus behaved to the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17) and to Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2). Note that both stories do appear in the same gospel (Luke 18:18). In one case, the command is to sell all he had and live a life of total poverty. In the other, giving up one fourth of his money was enough. So what is the rule? Consider the Hebrews text we listed above that suggests that what the Word of God does is to penetrate to the soul of a person. Consider also the observation we made that total love of God is the standard. In these two cases, different behaviors were required by the person for total obedience. Different behaviors were required in order to avoid sin.

The next and final observation, on passion, is so important to our understanding of sexual sins that we give it a separate section.

D. Passion, sexuality and sin.

Passion as a concept is not just about sex. Passion is our desires, our wishes that lead or drive us to do things, even things that are not that helpful to us.

There are a number of texts that typically associate sexual issues with concerns for lawlessness and dissipation.

To assist this process I present a second set of texts that overlap the list we've been working with now. I present texts that are about sexuality, licentiousness, control of the body or passions. Again, this is a sample of what the Bible has to say, not an exhaustive list. I believe it is a representative list.

Bible texts about passion and sexuality

For convenience, I repeat some of the texts listed previously. Please read each and consider its meaning.

2 Samuel 11: The story of David and Bathsheba

A classic story of passion leading to illicit sex and murder.

Jeremiah 17:9-10: “The heart (לֵב, libba) is devious above all else; it is perverse-- who can understand it? ¹⁰I the LORD test the mind (לֵב) and search the heart (כִּלְיֹת), to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings”

Matthew 5-7: ^{5:21}You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ... ²⁷"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Mark 7:17-23 (Matthew 15:10-20): “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.”

Romans 6: “should we continue in sin? ... by no means! ... Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.”

Romans 13:13: “... let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.”

1 Corinthians 5: “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you ... for a man is living with his father's wife.”

1 Corinthians 6:16: “Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh.”

1 Corinthians 7: “... ⁹each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. ... it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.”

Galatians 5:19: “Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.”

Ephesians 2:3: “All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.”

Colossians 3:5: “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).”

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12: “That each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, ..”

1 Timothy 4:1-5: "... For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving..."

James 4:1-6: "And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts."

1 Peter 4:3: "You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing and lawless idolatry."

Conclusions from these texts

1. Passion is a problem.

While it would be left to the spiritual writers to extensively explore the concepts of passion and self-control, the Bible directs us to the idea that humans, as they are constituted in a fallen world, possess urges and drives that lead us to sin.

While we believe that we were designed by God to behave well, there are forces at work within us that lead us to indulge ourselves and to destroy ourselves and our neighbors. Thus simply listening to our bodies, our hormones, doing what is "natural" or "feels good" is not a sufficient criterion for godly living. See: Luke 9:23-4; Romans 6; Gal 5:13-6:2; Theses. 4; James 4:1-6.

2. Sexuality is a temptation to abuse the neighbor.

In several of these texts, the collection of images used suggest the Bible's concern that sexual drives provide a strong temptation to self-indulgence at the expense of the neighbor. See Matt. 5:27 and I Thes. 4:1-12. Other texts that list vices associate sexual licentiousness with crimes against the neighbor.

Some specific insights about sexual holiness seem possible. Sexual sin seems to be the use of sexual appetites for the building up of self at the expense of others. God is telling us in many ways that to build self up at the expense of others does not build the true self in a lasting way. Building the self up in a way that enhances the community is more godly. Sex that manipulates, or deceives another explicitly or by silent assumption (she thinks he's committed, he knows she thinks that, but he's not) cannot be consistent with God's claim on our lives. Sex seems a particular area of temptation to sin.

As a result the Bible advocates strategies of self-control, marriage among them. By providing a positive outlet for sexuality it allows us to use this urge in a positive way. This is a rather shabby way of talking about the joys of total intimacy between two people, but apparently, it was the context Paul needed to address. Leaving that issue aside, why would not the same argument apply to homosexuals? Looked at dispassionately, it might suggest the church as a duty to bless and encourage homosexual unions.

3. Sexuality is a temptation to sin by self-deception.

While I am not aware of the New Testament ever using self-deception as a concept, it seems to be strongly implied by a number of texts. We are warned that our daydreams have consequences (Matt.) or that our cravings lead us to wrong actions (James).

Certainly this accords with our observation of human life. We are always attracted to, and wishing to love, people we shouldn't. Our judgment about our own relationships is faulty at best and driven by changing emotions.

Passion and the law

Passion comes over us, we are inflamed with desire and we do things that are not in our best interest and certainly not in the best interest of our neighbors. However, people do not all have the same type of passion. And this means that the law needed to control passion is not as simple as some suppose.

Let's consider two cases, drinking alcohol and committing adultery. Some people can drink socially and there is no problem. Some people are alcoholics and cannot stop their drinking. For them, the only salvation consists in obeying a firm law never to drink at all. But that law does not need to be adopted by every person. More subtle distinctions of rules apply as well, based on the situation. Some motorcycle riders will refuse all alcohol consumption prior to riding but would have a beer before driving a car: balance is more important to riding a motorcycle than a car. Airplane pilots who drink socially are forbidden to do so prior to flying.

Adultery, by comparison, does not work that way. I have no doubt that there are some people who have committed adultery, not been found out, and went on to maintain a deep relationship with their spouses. But no one thinks that is really acceptable. In adultery, everyone has to sneak around and if the person committing adultery has any moral conscience to them, they feel guilty and distant from their spouse, so they are no longer "one flesh," a sin. In any case, promises made before God were broken, another sin.

It is interesting that in the United States in recent years, some have tried to apply the rules of adultery to drinking and prohibit all consumption of alcohol before driving or to claim that even social drinking always indicates a problem with alcohol. Most people object to such claims as excessive or legalistic or evidence of a fanatical approach to the problem of alcoholism.

Sexuality in general, though, has rules like the distinctions made for the use of alcohol. Sex is powerful, it changes the nature of your relationships to people, as our texts suggest. Yet, it is a basis for sustaining married life and the species itself. While some are called to celibacy or have it forced upon them, not all are. So, given the powerful temptations of sex, rules are suggested, such as waiting before initiating sexual relations in a relationship. Having sex too soon, distorts both partners ability to judge the fitness of the relationship. Other rules limit what we say at work, how we act towards the gender we are attracted to so that we can avoid being in a situation where we are tempted. Pastors have rules prohibiting their sexual involvement with people they are counseling.

People can violate these rules and still make good choices, but many people cannot and the risk of self-deception and temptation becoming too strong are so likely that the rules are a good idea. Since these rules have grown up around heterosexual sexual situations, let's refer to them as the rules for heterosexual partners.

Homosexuality and passion

What about homosexuality? Is the passion involved in homosexuality more like the situation of alcohol use (or the situation of rules for heterosexual partners), or, on the other hand, is it more like adultery?

There is some argument, seldom raised in polite company, but there nonetheless, that homosexual acts and thoughts are, by definition, self-indulgent, licentious and degenerate. The argument goes that gays are always promiscuous and that love for someone of the same sex is inherently narcissistic as opposed to seeking fulfillment in "the other," and so on. When one goes into the shadows of the church one can hear this argument made crudely.

There are a number of responses. First notice how this argument is grounded not in scripture or theology, but in experience. If the argument is "all homosexuals are promiscuous, so homosexuals are bad" then the existence of gays who aren't promiscuous refutes the argument. We used to group gays together and assume that they could not be, for example, teachers, because they would inevitably molest children. We've eventually realized, after ruining many lives, that this isn't true at all. Gays molest no more than non-gays. A similar analysis of clichés about homosexuals will reveal the same answer: once we state sins in more neutral terms (molesting, murder, licentiousness, manipulation) we discover being gay does not make you do these things.

Likewise, the notion that loving your own gender is narcissistic is also a claim from experience, not the Bible. One wonders whether seeking a heterosexual partner to validate you isn't also narcissistic. A man can desire a beautiful trophy woman on his arm to give him status, a woman can desire a successful man to elevate her social standing. And two homosexuals may find each other challenging and endlessly different, and their relationship not be narcissistic.

More tellingly, the argument about inevitable dissipation in homosexual life comes from without. It is an argument about "the other," analogous to lawyer jokes and slams on professions made by those who don't have contact with the profession.

The argument does call attention to the concept of the besetting sin, a type of sin that a certain group may be prone to. It may be that lawyers (to continue the example) are prone to sharp practices, just as professors may be prone to like to hear themselves talk. A besetting sin doesn't call for the abolition of the profession. Homosexuals may have certain besetting sins, especially in this culture and time. So do heterosexuals.

Biblical texts on passion cannot, then, be used to reject homosexual activity. This is not to reject the texts, which seem very wise about the power of sex to distort. The texts should be applied to people of all sexual orientations.

E. The Nature of the Bible's teaching on sin

In summary, we should notice what we did and did not learn about sin from all that the Bible had to say on the subject.

The Bible wishes to teach about sin, not simply tell us what to do.

The Bible passages do list some sins, but also describe the choice between sin and obedience to God. The parables and sayings of Jesus seem designed to have us think, not just to follow blindly a set of rules.

The Bible expects us to acquire skill in judging what is sin

We are told to look into our hearts, that all things are lawful but we should chose to do beneficial things and we are told to love. We are warned against passion and what it can do to our sexual judgment.

It seems then that the task of Christian living to continuously go through the process of identifying behaviors not in obedience (being convicted of sin) and seeking change (amendment of life) to bring them into obedience.

8. Homosexuality is not inherently a sin

A. The Picture of an obedient Christian

The picture painted of the Christian by our investigation so far would be someone like this. A person who loves God and the neighbor, being particularly concerned about justice for weak and vulnerable neighbors. A person who shows obedience to God and seeks God's will for their life. A person who understands their besetting sins and works to avoid situations where they are tempted to sin. A person who gives central place to the Bible and works to understand its meaning for their lives and those close to them. A person whose interior life is not at variance with the picture they give to the world and who is not hiding behaviors or parts of their life.

Do we see that when we look at homosexuals who say they are Christian, as much as we see it when we look at heterosexuals who say they are Christian?

B. Changing our minds

Could the church really change its opinion on homosexuality without totally abandoning all it has stood for 2,000 years?

To some the question is impossible of any answer at all: the church does not change, not on anything important. But, how interesting it is that within the pages of the New Testament we see the church changing its mind on two issues.

Within the pages of Acts and the letters of the New Testament are recorded debates in the early church over the eating of food consecrated to idols (1 Corinthians 8) and the admittance of Gentile Christians to full fellowship without them first converting to Judaism. In both cases we can hear echoes of current disputes. The conservatives wish the church to hold to its historic tradition and are concerned about a lowering of standards if the rules are changed. Neither concern is foolish on the face of it. But a majority of the followers of Jesus were convinced to change.

In both cases, there were compromise, or rather, a deeper understanding of what was important and what was not. You can eat food consecrated to idols, Paul says, but don't cause problems for those who aren't as clear on your freedom to do so. Gentile Christians can be admitted without circumcision, but some rules must be kept.

As I have before, I call attention to the type of material in the Bible. I believe that the recording of these stories of conflict and change in policy are also part of the revelation the Bible has for us. They guide us to how we should change the policy of the church.

While not on a par with the Biblical witness, the Protestant Reformation also contains the record of changing direction and on an issue of sexuality. In the late medieval church, the vows of celibacy taken by clergy were routinely flouted. Many clergy had open relationships with women and publicly acknowledged children. Luther's rejected this practice, even though the church cited scripture in its defense.

C. Homosexuals: the new Gentile Christians

Richard B. Hays presents a striking analogy, comparing homosexuals to Gentile Christians: "... the experience of uncircumcised Gentiles responding in faith to the gospel message led the church back to a new reading of scripture. This new reading discovered in the texts a clear message of God's intent."⁸³

But, can we do that? Can we look at the behavior of people and decide on the law? Isn't that backwards, isn't the law is given by God?

So we now need to draw up various threads that have been launched over the course of this paper and speak directly of a principle of interpretation that has been alluded to previously, and that is the question of "history" vs. "revelation." Should we look for moral behavior to be "revealed" by being stated in a law of holy writ, or is it in some sense "historical" - requiring some research or an examination of human life? Specifically, should we seek an answer on homosexuality by looking for God's definitive word on the subject, or must we include the lives of gay and lesbian people as part of the material for the answer?"

It would seem wise to reject history in favor of revelation to avoid complete subjectivity or self-deception. And I, in chapter 2, rejected homosexual's use of their own sense of "rightness" about their lives as proof for accepting homosexuality.

However, there have been other aspects raised. What observations 2 and 4 suggested is that there *is* a revelation, and that the revelation is that you must look at the result of behavior, the result in terms of obedience to God.⁸⁴ Observation 2 forces us to consider our own behavior, observation 4 gives a criteria for the examination.

While this argument appears to open the door to any behavior the person wishes to justify, this is not the case for at least two significant reasons. First lies in the high standard the scriptures put forward and the comprehensiveness of the examination.

But more fundamentally, this is not a license to self-delusion because the isolated private self is not the arena of debate. Instead it is the community that must do the examination and have a public debate about the consequences of a behavior. So we do examine the experience of

⁸³ Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 397

⁸⁴ Consider for example, Jesus' command to "judge for your self," in Luke 12:57. Admittedly, this may be read as a rhetorical question.

homosexuals, not their experience in being attacked by the church, but their spiritual journey, especially those with a long history in the church. How has their experience in Christianity shaped their view of their sexuality?

Of course, the individual and the community will be prone to deceive itself for its own benefit. Particularly in the modern church context, the community is prone to regard “self-affirmation” and “growth” as synonyms for “obeying God.” The community cannot make this decision in isolation from a religious framework of the law and the gospel. Thus, we do need the principles of the law.

Nor can the conservative opponents of homosexuality really object to this approach. They have made attacks on gay promiscuity and other empirical judgments about gay life a centerpiece of their identification of homosexuality as sin.

But it is crucial to understand that this change is not because homosexuals are “nice” or because they “have been hurt” by the church or even because of secular justifications such as a desire to be “inclusive.” Hays again: “Only because the new experience of Gentile converts proved hermeneutically illuminating of Scripture was the church, over time, able to accept the decision to embrace Gentiles within the fellowship of God’s people.”⁸⁵

Thus what we need is not gays telling stories of self-affirmation. What we need is homosexuals discussing their spiritual journey, their fidelity to God and, this is critical, what temptations to passion exist as homosexuals. The encounter with a Christian homosexual should lead us non-homosexuals back to scripture to read it again.

D. What about the homosexual proof texts?

If we at this point, say, all that is fine, but what about Leviticus 18?, then this essay has not been read carefully. Without repeating the entire paper, it can be restated that what has been argued prior to now is the position that the entire Bible controls the few texts, not the other way around. We may briefly summarize our reasons for downgrading the significance of several key proof-texts:

Genesis 1 is said to give preference to marriage between a man and a woman.

The hermeneutical principle for this conclusion is not stated in the Bible.

Other conclusions from this principle are not accepted by the church.

Leviticus 18 prohibits homosexuality.

The specifics of the Levitical code are not binding on us.

This specific law is not needed to protect the community or to keep people close to God.

The themes of the Law that define sin would not include this activity.

⁸⁵ Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 399.

Romans 1 rejects homosexuality for being unnatural and the result of disobedience to God.
Paul makes an appeal to logic which is not valid.
Homosexuals are no more disobedient to God than heterosexuals.

The proof-texts then, are not the only word on the subject. They are contradicted by the sweep of the Bible, don't agree with what we see in the lives of gays, and thus the Bible, and the method prescribed by the Bible demand we regard them as no more normative than verses about menstruation or slaves taken in battle.

E. Homosexuality is not inherently a sin.

Is homosexuality a sin?

Self-indulgence is a sin. But the relationship of two people of the same sex may or may not be self-indulgent.

Abusing the neighbor is a sin. But the exploration of relationships among homosexuals as they search for partners, evaluate their existing formative relationships, and relate to each other may or may not be abusive.

Disobeying what God commands in the Bible is a sin. But, we have biblically-derived criteria for assessing and applying specific commands by reading them against larger themes.

Turning your back on God is a sin. Homosexuals are often among those who have turned their back on the church, and may be sinning because they also rejected the God they found in church. The church needs to be in mission to homosexuals with the message of Jesus and who God really is.

Yielding to your passions, even celebrating them is a sin. Homosexuals do include those who have done this. But it is not an inherent aspect of being gay.

Since we see people who have dedicated themselves to God, and for whom their gay sexual life is integrated into that decision and we see that their sexuality does not draw them away from church we must conclude that being and living gay is not a behavior in and of itself that produces pain to the neighbor and leads one away from God.

By the criteria the scripture sets for us for what is godly life, and by the reasoning scripture asks us to employ, homosexuality cannot be described as against God's law.

If this seems like a rather quiet sort of justification for homosexuality, then perhaps it is because the grand clichés of this debate have been shouted at us for too long. But look at the Bible: it's demands and vision cut across all categories, not staying on the surface but "penetrates even to

dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart,"⁸⁶ rejecting all forms of self-justification, all forms of attack on the "other" and all forms of escape from God's assessment of our behavior. How on earth could we have ever thought that a series of flat rules was all God wanted to tell us on morality?

⁸⁶ Hebrews 4:12

9. The church's proclamation to its members

The law proclaimed to homosexuals

The church's "position" on homosexuality should be similar to its "position" on heterosexuality: the question of sin occurs *within* the lifestyle, not *about* the lifestyle. Some heterosexual acts are sinful, some are holy, as the term heterosexual sex encompasses everything from "the two becoming one flesh" to rape. Homosexuals are indeed sinners, but sinners because of certain actions or thoughts, not because they are homosexual.

There are sexual sins to preach about to an audience of homosexuals. There is the sin of reducing another person to an object, of cruelly judging others as insufficiently beautiful, of seducing someone when you have no interest in them. There is the sin of feeling superior to boring married couples; there is the sin of desiring children because you seek to fit in to society. There is a need to examine when a person's sexual activity is healthy and when an addiction that robs them of their true purpose. There is the sin of attacking other homosexuals who decide to be celibate, or who are too openly gay, too conservative, or look too straight.

There are also sexual sins of self-denigration to preach about. There is the sin of thinking that God hates you, of thinking that you can never speak, think, or feel your sexuality in religious terms, the sin of pushing God away because God couldn't really want to be in relation with you, the sin of running yourself down so others won't get a chance. There is the sin of never loving, of never being open, the sin of walling yourself off from everyone else. There is the sin of thinking that you'd want to kill yourself because you think you're defective and broken.

The church should proclaim the Christian message to gays as it does to straights: with an uncompromising demand to love God and neighbor, to renounce self-indulgence and licentiousness. The church will then be as hard on gays as it should have been on straights. It will not be easy to be homosexual and a Christian because you will be called to a life of struggle against your human self-aggrandizement and towards placing all your life and gifts in God's service. But, this yoke, when once accepted will prove to be light.

The gospel proclaimed to homosexuals.

In one sense, the gospel to homosexuals is the same gospel proclaimed to everyone: the story of Christ, told with its significance.⁸⁷ Homosexual persons are not alien beings without experience of doubt, pain, sorrow, heartbreak, and tragedy like other people. Homosexuals also live knowing they will die. The gifts of Christian community, baptism, being part of the body of Christ, the life of worship, prayer, praise gathered around the bread and wine are as valued and needed as for anyone else.

⁸⁷ Prof. Ted Peter's formulation of the central message of the church.

But there is more. One gift the church can offer homosexual persons is the gift of marriage. This gift of the spirit is part of a “structure that liberates people for sanctification,” in the words of Adrienne von Speyr.⁸⁸ Given the troubled nature of the institution of heterosexual marriage, this may seem like a dubious gift indeed, but the same promise of a place to experience the terrifying and wonderful transformation that comes from someone actually knowing exactly who you are and loving you all the more should be available to homosexual Christians.

Those homosexual Christians not called to marriage, should experience the family of faith where they may take part in the raising of the community’s children like other un-married adults do.

What the church needs to say to homosexuals about sex, is the same as what it needs to say to heterosexuals about sex:

What we fail to make clear is that sexual passion (the good gifts of God’s creation) is now subservient to the demanding business of maintaining a revolutionary community in a world that often uses sex as a means of momentarily anesthetizing or distracting people from the basic vacuity of their lives. ...

We believe that it is only when our attentions are directed toward a demanding and exciting account of life that we have any way of handling something so powerful, so distracting, and so deadly as sex.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Quoted in Rogers, *Christian Body*, p. 247.

⁸⁹ Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*, p. 63, 64.

10. The church's proclamation to the world

The church should make the same sort of proclamation to the world on this issue as it does on all others. It calls for the renunciation of self-justification, and self-justification at the expense of the neighbor. It rejects categorizing people into groups either "gay" or "homophobic." It calls attention to the crushing of the individual and calls attention to the individuals attempt to be a god. The church insists on its own vision of life in this world, where self is not the idol, where "what's right for me" is not a universal good and where sex is not the solution to all problems.

The church will examine the structures of worldly sin that press on the homosexual. It will want to study how corporations, nations, unions, and all other groups seek to lead the homosexual person into relying on other saviors than God. The church will hold the memory of those who have demonstrated obedience in their lives.

In changing its view of homosexuality, the church will not be surrendering to a conformity to the world. "Constancy requires a particular kind of change."⁹⁰ In order to resist the real sins of this world the church needs to change its position on homosexuality so that it can remain authentically Christian. This change will be resisted by the world as fiercely as it resists all authentic Christian proclamation, because by changing, the church will open a proclamation to another group of people to resist the claims of lordship that the world wants to impose. The church will begin a searching proclamation that will expose the sin within the homosexual community. At least, this is what can be hoped for, the fumbling response of the church to the sin within the heterosexual community must always temper our hopes for the future.

In changing its position and accepting homosexuality, the church will not conform to the sin of the world, but rather, it will, I believe, be conforming to Christ and to what the Bible demands of us.

⁹⁰ Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*, p. 64.

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