

Examining the Biblical Texts about Homosexuality *Toward the Unity of the Body of Christ* | BY JOHN R. JONES

For Seventh-day Adventists, human considerations matter.¹ But such considerations do not suffice. As “people of the Book,” we instinctively turn to Scripture for guidance. We want help, and we want it on authority that transcends anecdotal or “common sense” appeals. So it is with questions of our sexual relationships. Early in any discussion of how we should sexually express our love for one another, the question of “what the Bible says” urges itself upon us. We experience it as foundational, *a priori*.

I write from the perspective of a heterosexual Caucasian male who through schooling and practice has arrived at certain insights into scriptural interpretation. My sociocultural location inevitably affects my perspective, even as I seek to listen sincerely to the voices (scriptural and contemporary) engaged in this conversation. As a student of Scripture, I come to the text with the scholarly tools of both traditional historical analysis and more recent literary approaches. These two locations—sociocultural and academic—I take as grounds for humility and continuing open-mindedness in proffering what follows.

What the Texts Meant

We will cut through much underbrush if we keep our questions framed correctly. In asking, *What biblical implications can we find for the ethics and boundaries of sexual expression in the context of loving same-sex relationships?* we can immediately set aside the horrific stories of Genesis 19 and Judges 19 as irrelevant. These accounts may have much to say about patriarchal hospitality codes, male control over women’s sexuality, and ethnic/tribal identity in ancient Israel, but we can only regard the same-sex aspect as serving at most to underscore the sense of contravention of boundaries.² Sodom and Gomorrah

subsequently function in Hebrew Scripture as bywords for a variety of evils from pride to oppression, but without reference to homosexuality.³

The Holiness Code

Leviticus 17–26 encodes the legal framework of Israelite society as attributed back to Moses.⁴ This framework structures an ethic of ritual purity, a code of sacral taboos through which Israel is to maintain a state of holiness before God. Always fragile and subject to threat, this state is constantly to be reinforced not only through ritual ceremonies, but also through meticulous observances in the sphere of everyday life. Included among its injunctions are the two instances of outright prohibition of same-sex intercourse to be found in the Bible: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (18:22); and “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” (20:13).⁵

Throughout the Holiness Code, it is only the adult males of the community, the “sons of Israel,” who are addressed; what women do sexually with women is not on the horizon. In the prohibition in Chapter 18, together with its sanction in Chapter 20, the wrongness resides in the feminizing treatment of one male by another: “as with a woman.” This pattern of concern over the blurring of distinctions in the conventional order is evident in many of the ceremonial law’s stipulations.⁶

Such stipulations forbid the mixing of two kinds of crops in one field, the wearing of garments composed of more than one type of fabric, or the crossbreeding of animals (Lev. 19:19).⁷ Some of them have to do with dietary practices (17:10–16), some with degrees of consanguinity for sexual relations (18:6–18), some with the trimming of hair and beard (19:27), and much else. In all, the

expressed intent is to avoid contamination by association with any practices that characterize other peoples. "You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine" (20:26). This holiness, then, is marked not only by separation from surrounding nations, but also by observance of other separations that the Israelites understood to express the canonic order of the universe.

Furthermore, the proscription against sex between males is understood to apply only to penetrative sex, for only so is the ancient taboo against the mixing of kinds violated.

With regard to the distinction between sexes, such a practice caused a man to be used as a woman—as a passive recipient of male "seed." With regard to the cultic identity of Israel, it contaminated their ceremonial purity by bringing in activities identified with the Canaanites. On both counts, the concern was not over an individual's sexual orientation or expression per se; homosexuality as we understand it today from the standpoint of the individual was simply absent from the thinking behind these injunctions.⁸ Rather, the concern was wholly corporate: it was to protect the symbolic markers between Israel and her neighbors. In this perspective, one's sexual conduct was no mere personal matter; it was loaded with overtones of cultural and national identity. And it was these overtones that determined the attitudes and sanctions regarding sexual behavior.

All of this, of course, comes to us as background. It participates in that larger conversation between Judaism and Christianity that began in New Testament times. And it poses again for us, as for the earliest Christian thinkers, the question, *How does scriptural fidelity relate to a religious heritage that vests its sexual norms in precisely those distinctions that are overcome in Christ?*

This article turns on that question. In the New Testament, the question brings into conversation three religio-cultural worlds—the ancient Israelite, the Hellenistic Roman, and the emerging Christian. Although

early Christians interact with both their Hebraic heritage and the thought world of gentile society, they are nonetheless shaping a new moral order. And in that order, they see themselves pushing beyond their two roots. It started with Jesus: he was understood to have both demonstrated and authorized the process. In him, questions of gender roles and relations, of the Holiness Code, of Jew/gentile interactions and much else are laid open to new perspectives.

With explicit regard to same-sex relations, however, we must wait for Paul to open the discussion; here the canonical Gospels provide no input from Jesus.⁹

The Gospel According to Paul

For Paul, the fact that the core of the gospel is the divine initiative toward humankind, centering in Jesus' death and resurrection, provides the lodestone from which he constantly takes his theological and ethical bearings. His construction of Christian theology around the cross of Christ provides the decisive standard for Christian life; nothing must be allowed to impinge on the believer's freedom, purchased at highest cost.¹⁰ It is for the sake of freedom that Christ has liberated us. This is no trivial matter; we are summoned to stand firm in that freedom, refusing to compromise the efficacy of Christ's cross by reintroducing superstitions of either pagan or Judaic origin into our walk by faith.

At the same time, this is no license for irresponsible or profligate behavior. "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence" (Gal. 5:13; compare v. 16). For Paul, flesh and spirit represent two opposite principles at work in human life. Even with all of his instinctive holism, he juxtaposes the works of one and the fruits of the other as setting the terms of our reach toward wholeness and freedom in Christ.¹¹

The implications are many and far reaching. But when it comes to how we shall live as Christians in this world,

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and sisters;
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for self-
indulgence.

Gal. 5:13

Paul is nowhere more pointed than in his famous summation at the close of Galatians 3: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." This single visionary statement demonstrates what the cross of Jesus means for Paul. It provides a focal lens through which to view all of his pronouncements on human relations, and points the trajectory for our own ongoing hermeneutic as we take up the task of appropriating his principles for our own time.

In light of Paul's first pairing above, our first question, "What biblical implications can we find for the ethics and boundaries of sexual expression in the context of loving same-sex relationships?" gets pulled directly into the second, "How does scriptural fidelity relate to a religious heritage that vests its sexual norms in precisely those distinctions that are overcome in Christ?"

We have observed the Levitical conviction that sex between Israelite males breaches the ethnic identity of the Hebrew people, who defined their chosenness and ceremonial purity in terms of their descent from Abraham. Now when these cultural and national bounds are transcended in Christ, the ground is cut out from under the proscriptions in Leviticus 18 and 20. When Paul affirms the equality of Jew and gentile before God, he is dismantling the framework on which these proscriptions stand.

To be sure, the distinction remains between God's holy people ("saints," as Paul regularly addresses them) and an unholy world. But if the distinction is now to be marked along nontribal lines, then any of the traditional markers must now be shown to carry other water, or go the way of that central symbol of tribal identity, circumcision. Paul's principle becomes more interesting as he pushes further: Just how far does this erasure of difference, in Christ, extend?

Clearly it goes far enough that when Paul wants to differentiate between life in the Spirit and the life of

fleshly indulgence, he can readily reach beyond the Judaic pale to gentile norms for support. His frequent use of catalogs of vices (as well as of virtues) appears to be shaped not so much by one-to-one correspondences with specific behaviors in a given situation as by conventional listings in popular Greco-Roman literature of the day.¹² Whether appropriated directly from commonplace moralizing in the larger world or mediated through Hellenistic Jewish tradition, these concatenations provide Paul with ready-made markers for the bounds of conduct for those who belong to the Kingdom.¹³

Sexual references make limited appearances in these lists. Unsurprisingly, the general term *pornos* , designating a fornicator, adulterer, or otherwise sexually immoral person, is the most common sexual term in such New Testament catalogs, occurring at 1 Corinthians 5:9, 10 and 11; 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10; and Revelation 21:8 and 22:15.¹⁴

Same-sex considerations do, however, arise at two points, in 1 Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:10, with the terms *arsenokoitēs* and *malakos* .

The Pauline Vice Lists

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul is working against the readiness of some Christians to go to court against their fellow believers over perceived wrongs. In

reproving them, he lists the kind of people in the world to whom they are turning for justice: "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God" (6:9–10). Where the 1952 Revised Standard Version has "homosexuals," the 1972 edition has "sexual perverts." In either case (as with the New International Version's "homosexual offenders"), these expressions combine a pair of terms in the Greek text, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* . These two terms stand behind the expressions *male prostitutes* and *sodomites* in the New Revised Standard Version.

Paul is progressively building up a conventional catalog of kinds of people who carried some stigma in the larger

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1 Cor. 6:9

society, to make his point of Christian distinctiveness. To the four examples in 5:10, he adds two more in verse 11 and an additional four in 6:9–10:¹⁵

1 Corinthians 5:10	1 Corinthians 5:11	1 Corinthians 6:9–10
immoral	immoral	immoral
greedy	greedy	idolators
robbers	idolators	adulterers
idolators	revilers	<i>malakoi</i>
	drunkards	<i>arsenokoitai</i>
	robbers	thieves
		greedy
		drunkards
		revilers
		robbers

This may be evidence that Paul is here depending on pre-established catalogs, without focusing on any particular item. The lists lengthen for rhetorical effect.¹⁶ As for *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, the two terms are not grammatically paired—as are the “greedy” and the “robbers” of the first list. Rather, they are separated by the same “or” as are the other terms. Accordingly, we will consider them separately.

Malakos. Used adjectivally, this term carries the basic quality of “softness.” In the New Testament, it appears three times in this usage (twice in Matt. 11:8; and in the parallel, Luke 7:25), modifying the noun *clothing*. Jesus contrasts the ruggedness of anyone who lives in the desert with those who live luxuriously in palaces, and his peasant hearers would have appreciated the jibe. But the fact that this saying is preserved in the Gospels implies that it also resonated later with Christians in the larger Roman world who found themselves under duress from the rulers of their day. If soft living was a marker of the oppressor, then by contrast the oppressed were bound to see themselves at its opposite, more stringent pole. Such a stance could stiffen their resistance to persecution, strengthening spines by means of a certain hard-edged style.

So natural was this tendency that it could descend into outright bravado. Again it is Matthew and Luke who give us the picture of a macho Peter at the Last Supper, avowing his steadfastness and prompting his fellow disciples to join in (Matt. 26:33–35 = Luke 22:33–34). The incident, surely, is recorded as a cautionary word to later believers, as to how the threat of persecution is to be met: not with swagger but with the steadfast firmness

of faith.¹⁷ Evidently the caution was needed.

This connotation provides an important interpretive frame for the one time the term *malakos* appears as a noun in the New Testament. In its plural form, *malakoi* is included in the listing of unworthy types in 1 Corinthians 6. Polycarp (d. 155 C.E.), himself a voluntary martyr, similarly uses it in his listing of those who will not inherit the Kingdom.¹⁸ By contrast, when Polycarp enters the arena of his death, he hears a voice from heaven: “Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man [*andrizou*].”¹⁹

For a community under such pressure, it is hardly surprising that a certain semantic polarity would evolve between the strength of character that endures and the kind of weakness that folds. And given the dualistic assumptions of the Greco-Roman world, it was equally predictable that the former would be invested with overtones of manly virtue, whereas the latter would be projected as effeminate.²⁰

Such a construct, under life-and-death conditions, goes well beyond mere dismissals of wimpiness as a personal affect. This was serious business. The gospel’s summons, even in its call to freedom, was also a summons to a certain stern and austere ethos. Paul’s military metaphors draw upon what was doubtless the standard view, in early Christian circles, of their situation. Members saw themselves engaged in a vital “struggle” (Eph. 6:12) against forces both spiritual and physical (Rom. 8:38–39). They were called to become “more than conquerors” (8:37) over the hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword they confronted in an alien world. Such conditions inevitably shape the social codes of any group so positioned. Clearly, early Christians found themselves threading their way between the two extremes of overassertiveness and capitulation.

Even short of voluntary martyrdom, then, there could be little room for “softness.” That *malakoi* would come to appear among conventional listings of undesirables in such circles is hardly surprising. In such a world, whether in a Palestinian Jewish setting or a gentile Christian context, Jesus’ dig at voluptuaries who wear soft clothing would have served to caricature who the oppressors were—and who his followers were not. With or without intimations of any particular sexual conduct, the term would certainly have addressed a larger issue having to do with the integrity of the community: Would they all prove faithful under duress? Were they made of the right stuff?

Viewed through sociological glasses, a certain rough-hewn ethos would seem to have already been natural to the underclass who made up much of the Christian community in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:26–28). Prior to their conversion, it would have served as a class marker, and now as Christians they could readily carry forward that same code to mark their even greater distance from the alien world of privileged social elites who were additionally becoming their oppressors. Within the faith, Paul could play to such attitudes by contrasting the “super-apostles” (2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11), who always escaped hardship, with his own sufferings for Christ (11:23–29). All the more, then, could he appeal to that code as a way of distancing the believers from the outsiders to whom they were turning for redress of disagreements among themselves. How could they take individual recourse to such *malakoi*, the silken magistrates of a legal system that was the instrument of their oppression as a group?

None of this, of course, negates the possibility that the term *malakos* included male homosexual behavior. It simply locates the opprobrium where it belongs: as part of a larger pattern of self-indulgent, lustful living that was precisely the opposite of the values the threatened underclass of Christians espoused.²¹ Under the duress of worldly challenges and the shortness of the hour, even heterosexual marriage could be but grudgingly accommodated as an alternative to “burning” (1 Cor. 7:6–9). Given the universal assumption of the day that homosexual relations were motivated simply by fleshly passion, neither the conduct nor the self-indulgent style of which it was perceived to be a part had any place in the beleaguered community’s life.

Arsenokoitēs. This noun, composed as it is of two Greek words *arsēn* (male) and *koitē* (a bed, euphemistically used for sexual intercourse), invites a straightforward interpretation as a male who engages sexually with other males. But if we take seriously the appropriate cautions against

mechanically turning to etymologies—actual or supposed—to define the semantic domain of a term, we must dig deeper.²² Given the fact that meaning is contextually determined, a term’s signification is best traced by observing its function in as many contexts as possible—especially those closest in time and subject matter.

When it comes to the noun *Arsenokoitēs* or the verb *arsenokoitein*, however, we have few such resources. The term appears to be a coinage of the Jewish community of Paul’s day; the first instances of any form are its two appearances in the New Testament letters (*arsenokoitai*, 1 Cor. 6:9;

arsenokoitais, 1 Tim. 1:10). The two halves of the word appear as separate words in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, at the two Levitical prohibitions considered above.²³ The composite term, then, may well have been a common usage in Hellenistic Jewish circles, derived from these Levitical texts.

Essentially, we are dependent on the appearances of this term in the vice lists of the Greek Christian writings. Still, certain clear pointers reside there, providing important guidance. First, the vices in the conventional catalogs of undesirable behaviors can be seen to cluster themselves in overarching categories, such as sexual misconduct, violence, injustice, and others. Second, in the two New Testament occurrences of the term, it appears precisely in between sexual and other sins—especially greed, selfishness, and exploitation. Third, the same ordering appears in a comparable list in a second-century Christian treatise by Theophilus of Antioch, *To*

Autolychus. This pattern suggests that the sequence may have been conventional and the term may well have incorporated both elements—exploitive and selfish behavior of a sexual sort. This implication of the ordering receives some reinforcement from the term’s occurrence in another second century source, Aristides’ *Apologia*, where it is connected with the idea of being “an obsessive corrupter of boys.”²⁴



Indeed, if we ask which of the two aspects is the leading one, the emphasis may well be on that of economic or even violent coercion. At an earlier point in Theophilus's work, there is a similar listing, in which *arsenokoïtes* is separated from sins of sexual immorality, to appear among those of economic injustice.²⁵ The case is bolstered by other extracanonical examples, drawn from the *Sibylline Oracle* (2:70–77) and from the second-century *Acts of John* (2:279–82), showing that *arsenokoïtes* occurs in these vice lists, “not where we would expect to find reference to homosexual intercourse—that is, along with adultery (*moicheia*) and prostitution or illicit sex (*porneia*)—but among vices related to economic injustice or exploitation.”²⁶ The plural form *koitai* (as in Rom. 13:13) evidently points to repetitive conduct, excessive sexual behavior, whether as obsession or prostitution. It is quite possible “that the author attached to the compound a meaning like ‘male prostitution.’”²⁷

So we almost certainly have to do with homoerotic activity of an exploitative sort. This is about as far as the rather cryptic references in vice lists can get us.

The Significance of Romans 1

Romans 1:24–27 contains the Bible's only substantive consideration of homosexual conduct. The two sentences in verses 26b and 27 are the interpretive crux of debates concerning scriptural teachings on same-sex relations. Yet even here this matter is subsidiary to Paul's larger and more central purpose in writing to the Christian community in Rome: winning acceptance both for himself personally and for his understanding of the gospel. And he is trying to do this among people whom he has not met and who number both Jewish and gentile believers—among whom there were bound to be tensions. So he has thought out his approach with care.

Building on his conviction that in Christ there is neither Jew nor gentile, he wants to unite both groups of believers at the foot of the cross. He is headed for the point (in Chapter 3) where he can speak of the central revelation from God: all are equally sinful, and all, whether or not they have the Judaic law in their background, are equally justified on the basis of faith (3:21–26). So in Romans 1:16–17, Paul boldly sets out the good news of God's righteousness: “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

To bring out the implications for Jews and non-Jews alike, Paul then makes the standard move of Christian evan-

gelism. He steps back to a prior revelation that is not news—certainly not to his Jewish-Christian audience, whom he is especially addressing here: God's wrath has already been revealed against all who suppress the truth (1:18). This case is developed through four paragraphs in Chapter 1, beginning with verses 18, 24, 26, and 28, respectively.²⁸ The first paragraph (1:18–23) makes clear that this entire section (1:18–32) is an indictment of non-Jewish inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world. Their idolatry is the source of the problems in the following verses, for they have turned away from the divine revelation that they have received via the observable world, exchanging the Creator's glory for images of the creatures—human and subhuman:

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; “for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. “Claiming to be wise, they became fools; “and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

The next three paragraphs unfold God's continuing withdrawal in consequence of this idolatry. This progressive divine resignation can be traced through two levels of depravity, one having to do with impurity (*akatharsia*, uncleanness), and the other with moral evil (*adikia*, *ponēria*, wickedness, evil). The distinction is marked: on the second level, in the two paragraphs dealing with the dishonoring of their bodies in impurity (1:24), Paul disparages their conduct along lines of Hellenistic Jewish propaganda against gentiles, which in turn draws upon attitudes of certain Greco-Roman thinkers themselves.²⁹ The fourth paragraph (1:28–32) returns to the “ungodliness and wickedness” (*asebeia*, *adikia*, v. 18) of the first level and the first paragraph:

Level 1	Paragraph 1	Paragraph 4
moral evil	18–23	28–32
Level 2	Paragraph 2	Paragraph 3
ceremonial impurity	24–25	26–27

There is a certain crescendo in all this, discernable even within Level 2. In true rhetorical style, Paul rounds off his second paragraph with a ritual invocation of God's name:

²⁴Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

It goes without saying that the "Amen" signals a chorus of assent from his Jewish hearers.

That interruption, however, requires him to repeat his refrain with the beginning of his third paragraph:

²⁶For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion with one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

Then Paul's technique of the ascending effect becomes more marked as he shifts levels. Again the refrain, "God gave them up," at the beginning of his fourth paragraph:

²⁸And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.

²⁹They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, ³¹foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³²They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

This extensive vice list deepens the wrongness from what is shameful (literally, "shameless," "disgraceful") and unnatural to outright evil. Such moral language is anticipated in the first paragraph but is absent in the middle two paragraphs, which deal with same-sex relations. At the same time, the matter of same-sex relations is lacking in the catalog of evils in the final paragraph.³⁰ Even as his cadence quickens, Paul's declamation deepens his charge.

In all of this, we see the dynamic of a new religious movement in conversation with its religious and philo-

sophical precedents. This process is just getting under way in the first Christian century.

Vis-à-vis Greco-Roman thought, three main issues emerge: attitudes toward pleasure, attitudes toward procreation, and understandings of natural order. The first two considerations interact to some extent. Already with Plato, any sexual act pursued for the sake of pleasure over the citizen's duty to produce offspring for the state is a personal defeat in one's struggle against self-indulgence.³¹ The Stoics would largely have concurred, primarily on grounds of natural law.³²

Paul's admonition to make no provision for gratifying fleshly desires (Gal. 5:16) would at first seem to be of a piece with the stern voice of self-governance (*autarcheia*) as a Greco-Roman ideal. Yet even though his attitude toward marriage is concessive, his reminder to couples to attend to each other's sexual desires (1 Cor. 7:1–7) grants the legitimacy of pleasure in the Christian life.³³ And with time in this world running out (7:29), Paul would hardly have subordinated sexual fulfillment to an imperative for procreation. In these two regards, then, he stands over against an important current of his time. In Romans 1, however, his opposition lies elsewhere.

With the expression "unnatural" (*para phusin*, "contrary to nature") Paul moves into conversation with both the gentile and Judaic perspectives. On the Greek side, Plato had already used the expression to characterize male homogenital sex.³⁴ Additional instances from around the ancient Mediterranean world, using the same expression as a regular reference, can readily be cited.³⁵

In what senses is homogenital sex thought of as contrary to nature in the gentile world? Its nonprocreative character is part of the picture, together with the popular notion that animals, as exemplifying the "natural" order, engage only in opposite-sex mating.³⁶ Greco-Roman writers do not seem to be personalizing the matter, as if same-sex intercourse were a contravention of the particular individual's heterosexual nature.³⁷ It is possible, but less likely, that *para phusin* is to be translated in these references as "beyond natural passion," given popular notions of the day that associated pederasty with excessive lustfulness.³⁸ Essentially, it means that which is nonstandard, outside the norm. While the expression in gentile usage could refer to a number of sexual practices, it certainly included same-sex intercourse, as here in Romans 1.³⁹

The issue, of course, is to what extent this common-

place way of referring to homogenital sex involved a moral judgment in Hellenistic Roman society. It is true that “the concept of ‘natural law’ was not fully developed until more than a millennium after Paul’s death, and it is anachronistic to read it into his words.”⁴⁰ Even so, four popular notions seem to have entered into conventional ideas about homogenital sex in relation to what was understood to be natural.⁴¹ First, while heterosexuality and homosexuality as constructions of the self, together with any underlying considerations of biology, psychology, or sociology, were far from the conceptual horizon of that day, the standard assumption was that same-sex intercourse was a deliberate overriding of a universal “natural” desire for the opposite sex. It was, in short, regarded as a choice. Second, that choice was assumed to be motivated by inordinate and overly indulged sexual appetites. Third, the practices of the time, whether involving pederasty, male prostitution, or male/male intercourse between master and slave, were uniformly understood to involve established relations of dominance and submission—thus demeaning a male into assuming what was “naturally” the female role. The ostensible natural order was thereby being confused. Fourth, it was feared that homoerotic practice could lead to infertility—with potential for the extinction of the human race. This was predicated on an assumption that, just as heterosexual attraction was the natural and universal norm, so same-sex attraction was a temptation for everyone.

Two key observations immediately follow. First, what passed for “natural” in the Greco-Roman world was in fact “what was culturally prevalent and socially accepted.”⁴² Second, homogenital sex, at least between males, was starting to be disparaged as indecent conduct. Although there were several reservations about the practice, they converged in the appeal to what nature, however construed, seemed to imply. It was not condemned on moral grounds; but by Paul’s time, even the gentile world was beginning to voice disapproval.⁴³



Paul builds on this. In so doing, he has ample precedent from Jewish sources, which in turn found ready ammunition in the reservations emerging in the larger Roman world. So the Jewish philosopher Philo writes from Alexandria at about the same time, disparaging same-sex practices as a gentile vice. For him, the epitome of the problem was its shameless alteration of nature. “In fact, the transformation of the male nature to the female is practiced by them as an art and does not raise a blush.”⁴⁴

Just as Paul shares the common assumption among Greeks and Jews about same-sex relations as flying in

nature’s face, so he also shares the common conception as to what nature is. First, he consistently uses the term *phusis* to refer not to an overarching principle, but to specific instances of the “nature of” some particular person or thing.⁴⁵ Second, of the eleven occurrences of “nature” (*phusis*) or “natural” (*phusikōs*) in the Pauline writings, this passage in Romans 1 is the only one into which one could read a moral principle.⁴⁶ Third, Paul is as indebted to his contemporary cultural norms for his allusions to “nature” as are his gentile counterparts.⁴⁷ It is this cultural element that accounts for the shading of “unnatural” (*para phusin*) over into “shameless” (*aschēmosunē*) in Romans 1:27, a common judgment on pederasty in Paul’s time. These considerations, taken together, locate Paul’s reference to nature within the conventional grounds on which Hellenistic Roman criticisms were being expressed.

The Jewish perspective, however, does impose a further judgment on homoerotic acts, beyond the gentile reservations. Standard Jewish associations of homoerotic sex with pagan idolatry do add an overlay of moral judgment, which comes through in the first paragraph (that is, Level 1) of this passage. The most obvious connection is with temple prostitution, though Paul, like his fellow Jews, views the whole matter more broadly. Here in Romans 1, homogenital sexual practices

symbolize the whole problem of the estrangement from God that follows from false religion.

This, of course, is a rhetorical choice on Paul's part. From a Christian standpoint all false divinities are nothing.⁴⁸ But here in Romans 1, Paul chooses another stance, involving a twofold shift of perspective. First, the practitioners are envisioned here apart from any reference to Christianity; it is their pagan devotion to the creature rather than to the Creator that, ironically, leads them to act against the nature they claim to venerate. Second, Paul is speaking here in the voice of pre-Christian Jews in echoing their denunciations of what they especially regarded as a gentile vice.

While Paul is indeed driving toward a united community of gentile and Jewish Christians at the foot of the Cross, the only way to get there, he understands, is to bring home to each group their absolute dependence on God's forgiveness. There is to be no distinction: all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory; all are now justified only by God's grace (Rom. 3:22–24). Any vestige of their pre-Christian superiorities toward each other will prevent their acceptance of what Christ has done for all. Hence the double shift: In order to get at the problem of any such vestiges, Paul has clearly backed up to the pre-Christian conditions and attitudes of both groups.

Paul's primary target in this is his fellow Jews. The point, ultimately, is less what gentiles have done than what the Jews' attitude toward them has been.⁴⁹ His strategy, accordingly, is to bring to the surface those old judgments so as to deal with them from a Christian standpoint. By aligning himself with the pre-Christian Jewish perspective in Romans 1, Paul positions himself to hold up a mirror before their eyes in Chapter 2.

To be sure, when he gets there he will undercut Jewish judgmentalism, not by defending the gentiles' behavior but by extending the guilt to their Jewish critics. "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others, for in passing judgment on another you condemn

yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things" (Rom. 2:1). Even so, his point of departure in Romans 1 is a judgment that has its native roots in ancient Hebraic convictions—and so owes nothing to the reservations that were beginning to arise in the surrounding gentile world.⁵⁰ Paul must engage his compatriots on their own terms. In so doing, he falls back upon the locutions of his years of proclaiming the gospel in Jewish synagogues.⁵¹

This helps us understand why Paul as a Christian relies on pre-Christian Jewish sources for his language. There is hardly a word in Romans 1:24–27, that does not echo

Hellenistic Jewish propaganda against gentiles.⁵² Paul's indebtedness brings with it the language of impurity (*akatharsia*), dishonor (*atimazesthai*, *atimias*), and shame (*aschēmosunēn*).⁵³

None of this implies that Paul does not disparage the conduct in these verses; he clearly does. But in aligning himself with traditional Jewish judgments he reverts into that earlier world of condemnation. Here the ancient cultic taboos still operate. Here the wrongness once again expresses the tribal markers. Level 2 (paragraphs 2 and 3) of this passage reprieves precisely those elements of Judaic separatism that Paul wants to evoke.

If his Jewish compatriots regard homogenital relations as the epitome of pagan difference from themselves, Paul moves to shift the ground of the discussion. He can indeed speak of godlessness (*asebeia*), wickedness (*adikia*), outright evil, and malice (*ponēria*, *kakia*).

Rom. 2:1

This deeply moralizing language of Level 1 (paragraphs 1 and 4) makes clear

that, for Paul, the first and deepest result of idolatry is outright sinfulness, as catalogued in the longest and most explicit vice list in his writings.⁵⁴ On this Level 1, devoid of all reference to sexual misconduct, Paul will eventually turn the table on his compatriots, accusing them, too, of openly flouting the divine will. Then, having already been filled up with such evil, the gentiles further experience the impurity to which God resigns them.⁵⁵ This is the second, and secondary, negative outcome of idolatry, which Paul carefully restricts to Level 2 of the

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passage, and for which he uses quite different language.

Here in Romans 1 the real conversation between Christianity and Judaism has not yet begun. It will begin with the Jews' culpability in Chapter 2 and will emerge more fully with the divine remedy in 3:21f. But in our present passage, Paul has so positioned himself that no daylight yet opens up between the Judaism of his day and his rhetorical stance. It is mistaken, then, to look here for the definitive word on same-sex relations or anything else from a developed Christian standpoint.

What the Texts Mean for Us Today

Our overarching question, "What biblical implications can we find for the ethics and boundaries of sexual expression in the context of loving same-sex relationships?" turns in part on the subsidiary question, "How does scriptural fidelity relate to a religious heritage that vests its sexual norms in precisely those distinctions that are overcome in Christ?" So let us consider them in reverse order, with particular reference to Romans 1.

Sexual Norms and the Distinctions Overcome in Christ

Today's discussion of Romans 1 centers primarily on the issue of the moral status of the same-sex conduct that Paul adduces there. There is no question of his strongly negative perception; the question is, *What are the grounds for that negativity?* Several issues feed into the various attempts to answer this question. One's answer can largely be predicted from which of these issues rises to the top in the eyes of a given interpreter.

Sin or uncleanness? For some who take their cue from Paul's expression "unnatural" (*para phusin*), the determinative considerations remain those of natural law.⁵⁶ For such, this principle moves to the fore as a divinely ordained creation order, despite the culturally conditioned character of the gender assumptions reflected in the New Testament and the Greco-Roman world. This approach regularly accompanies a reading of the Levitical taboos as absolute, definitive scriptural injunctions for all times and circumstances. By privileging this issue of natural law, these interpreters seek to present the Holiness Code as still morally binding in Christ. Paul's language in Romans 1:26f, though admittedly couched in terms of impurity, is then regarded as a reaffirmation of unexceptionable regulations reflecting a universal order.

But the difficulties remain: The ancient Holiness Code did indeed proceed from a perceived creation order, but it is at most an open question whether such an order as a theological principle can be traced through Romans 1. If so, it has to be taken as a singular use of an argument from nature as a cosmic principle of morality on Paul's part. If so, one must explain the marked difference between Levels 1 and 2 in this passage, where Paul so consistently references homogenital sex in cultic rather than moral terms.

Above all, we are left with the reduction of morality to casuistry. The focus on homosexual acts can become a device for working around contemporary insights into sexual orientation: One can treat same-sex orientation as a morally neutral phenomenon, while proscribing its expression as a moral evil.⁵⁷ But so behavioral an approach, while mirroring that of the Levitical codes, falls short of an adequately Christian perspective.⁵⁸ "If homosexual practice is to be discussed in a Christian context as culpable in all cases, it should be articulated as sin and not as uncleanness—because the New Testament has delegitimized the latter category."⁵⁹ In regarding uncleanness as sin, we risk collapsing together categories that, even prior to Christ, are distinguished in Scripture.

Alternatively, interpreters who recognize the strongly cultic nature of the Level 2 language in the Romans 1 passage do not attempt to stretch it beyond the symbolic world of ritual purity. From this standpoint, it is enough to state,

While Paul wrote of such acts as being unclean, dishonorable, improper, and "over against nature," he did not apply the language of sin to them at all. Instead, he treated homosexual behavior as an integral if unpleasingly dirty aspect of Gentile culture. It was not in itself sinful, but had been visited upon the Gentiles as recompense for sins, chiefly the sin of idolatry but also those of social disruption.⁶⁰

Such a reading has the advantage of allowing the texts to function in the mode in which they actually speak. By respecting the distinction Paul himself observed, it avoids the fallacy of arguing that somehow in Christ the two levels are collapsed into one.

Seventh-day Adventists have been particularly sensitive to the distinction between the ceremonial and the moral law, taking the seventh-day Sabbath's inclusion in the Decalogue precisely as the criterion of its endurance into the Christian era.⁶¹ The ceremonial law, by contrast, fades

out in the face of the new reality that Christ brings.⁶² The question now becomes one of our readiness to indeed accept that new reality in Christ.

Christian or pre-Christian? All of these interpretations take some passing notice of Paul's rhetorical strategy in the opening chapters of Romans. His intent, it is universally understood, is comparable to that of a parable in which the hearer is drawn in to a particular perspective, then is caught by surprise as that perspective is applied to the hearer in unanticipated ways. So the Jews here, having had their judgments against gentiles brought to the surface, are to be shown their own need of divine grace. But as correct as this observation is, Paul's strategy of speaking requires it to be met on our part with a more considered strategy of reading. Most interpretations proceed from an apparently unexamined assumption that Paul's voice in Romans 1:18–32, is that of a Christian theologian making definitive pronouncements about homoeroticism. This flattening of the text simply fails to catch the voice in which Paul speaks.

For here in Romans 1:18–32, it is not fully Paul's own Christian voice. Indeed, even in Romans 2, where he turns the table on his compatriots, he is still addressing them simply as Jews, not yet as converts to Christ. This is not to make of his presentation a pretense; he is utterly serious about what he is saying. But he is saying it in a way that reaches back behind the Jewish Christians' experience of Christ. In so doing, both his terms and his tone deepen the Jews' revulsion toward gentiles by starting with the way they have traditionally regarded them. Shortly this will play out into some explicit lessons as to how they shall regard themselves, and then into their regard for their gentile fellow believers from the Kingdom's fresh perspective. But all of that comes later. Here in his opening chapter, it is enough for Paul to locate himself, the Jews, and even his Jewish Christian hearers in their conventional Judaic ways of thinking about these things.

It becomes important, then, to cut the question of our passage in Romans 1 in two ways: The traditional standard inquiry as to "sin or uncleanness?" needs to be complemented with the further question, "Christian or pre-Christian?" Helpful as it is for setting up his topic of the universal need for deliverance, Paul's approach is not aimed at sketching the Christian life. The only way questions of same-sex relations could be pressed into such an agenda, beyond simply flagging the very boundaries Paul

means to break down, is to show when and how homogenital intercourse in and of itself came to be deepened into sin. And here Paul does not oblige us. His two sentences in Romans 1, for all their vehemence, have served his rhetorical purposes; he doesn't pursue the matter for its own sake.

Our reading, then, will respect Paul's purposes and allow him to speak to them in his own way. We do Paul no justice when we seize upon a subsidiary point and make it function beyond his intent. What we owe him is serious attention to what he is about: the tragic consequences of human sinfulness, especially stemming from various forms of idolatry, and the rifts that can result in the Body of Christ when arrogance on either side, indecent conduct, moral evil, and religio-cultural elitism take hold. These are the problems that occupy the body of his letter; the cultic issues resurface only afterward, in Chapter 14. The contours of our reading, then, are to match those of Paul's writing.

Paul's world and ours. We have noted something of the interactions between Paul's own conceptual horizon and those of his various audiences in his letter. This is important for how we are to read him. But if we are to read him without wresting his thought, we must further consider the relationship between Paul's frame of reference and our own.

Part of the disconnection between Paul's interests and ours derives from the difference between our thought categories and his. The difference first arises with the English term *homosexual* itself. Given that both the label and the concept behind it are of comparatively modern origin, we can too glibly assimilate his frame of reference into our own.⁶³ But "what we mean by the term 'homosexuality' in the late twentieth century is for the most part rather different from what the biblical texts are discussing." This is not a trivial problem. Indeed, in order to preclude reading our modern understandings of homosexuality anachronistically back into the biblical texts, "we should stop talking about what the Bible has to say regarding 'homosexuality.'"⁶⁴

And yet Scripture matters. It matters to the extent that we can establish legitimate overlaps in fields of meaning between scriptural conceptions and ours. In holding together certain people and certain biblical passages—all individuals who engage in homogenital sexual activity of any kind and context together with all texts that mention such activity of any kind and context—we can legitimate-

ly get a partial overlap. The scriptural condemnations of various exploitative and lustful sexual behaviors (same-sex or opposite-sex) in Paul's time are rightly applied to such behaviors (same-sex or opposite-sex) today. But let us note that the two horizons—textual and contemporary—are now converging around the relational and character issues rather than around the question of sexual orientation as such.

Clearly in Romans 1, we have to do with at least a partial incongruence between conceptual horizons, between the box within which Paul was writing, and our box into which we want to fit him. In our quest for answers concerning "homosexuality" as a condition (even if we regard it as a mutable condition), we are asking Paul to address a category of being that was essentially uncomprehended in his world. If the Greeks assumed everyone was, at least potentially, bisexual, the Jews assumed everyone was naturally heterosexual.⁶⁵ The standard models of the day for same-sex eroticism were all exploitative to one degree or another, and understood to be more or less transitory—whether involving pederasty, temple prostitution, or master/slave relations. Thus, for Paul and all other ancient writers, Christian or not, the horizon of possibilities hardly provided for a developed notion of inherent homosexuality, or, concomitantly, of loving, enduring bonds between same-sex partners in committed, consensual, and exclusive relationships.⁶⁶

Here we must recognize that our essentializing of homosexuality can lead us into inappropriately limiting our selection of texts when we look for scriptural guidance today. We illegitimately try to force an overlap when we attempt to stretch the ancient models to cover the entire contemporary spectrum. For this leads us into category errors. If we want to hear the Scriptures fully, we must allow them to point us toward additional legitimate lines of thought that can broaden our selection of texts—thus enabling the Bible to build its own bridges between its world and ours. On doing so, we find that there are indeed pertinent axes of connection

that provide some real guidance without forcing the text.

What are the criteria of this legitimacy? For present purposes, two. First, a Christian interpretation must be carried out within a Christian framework. This does not exclude pre-Christian scriptural passages from Christian reflection, but the early Christian communities, through many challenges, pointed the way: They understood that their interpretations of the Scriptures, like interpretations of the meaning of Jesus himself, must be carried out from within the new perspectives that Jesus brought to the human situation. The implications and outcomes of this

process were not always self-evident to those pioneers of faith; this was no simple matter. When we trace the dynamics of their struggles we see how surprised they were at God's gradually emerging intentions for them. And we are astonished at their gutsiness, ultimately, as they tried to follow where the Spirit was leading.

Even so, their advances were partial—which brings our second criterion: It is not required that everything must be fully realized in Scripture. It is required that the Scriptures genuinely point the way to any values and truths we espouse. This is because Scripture remains authoritative for us. In modeling for us the faithful discipleship of the first followers of Christ, the Bible sets our feet on the path of our own onward pilgrimage. A legitimate trajectory between scriptural understandings and our own is necessary; but it is just that: a trajectory. Our task is to extend that potential into our own lives, and to do this

along lines consistent with the Christian perspectives that Scripture itself provides for us.

These principles of reading bring us to the pay-off, in principles for our living. How shall we then live?

Sexual Expression in Loving Same-Sex Relationships

We return to the first question with which we opened this chapter: "What biblical implications can we find for the



ethics and boundaries of sexual expression in the context of loving same-sex relationships?" How might this look, as we seek scriptural fidelity today? Three broad brushstrokes follow, as illustrations of characteristic features.

The first brushstroke has to do with the ethics of our interpretations.⁶⁷ Discussions of issues of homosexuality (as of much else) too often take place on only one of two planes, without allowing either to intersect the other. For some, the strong inner sense of self-evident right and wrong leads them to turn away from Scripture as simply not helpful. Others, unwilling to abandon the Bible as authoritative for faith and practice, refuse to set its witness aside. The latter may, however, take exegesis to be a process of drawing out a single particular message as the text's only potential meaning. This way of thinking can fail to see that all readings, including those of scholars who mean to be as objective as possible, reflect the perspectives one brings to the text. Meaning, it turns out, arises in the encounter between text and reader.⁶⁸

In this light, our very act of reading assumes an ethical dimension. We must own responsibility for the impact that our interpretations exert in the lives of others. Far from presenting our findings with a take-it-or-leave-it shrug that absolves us of accountability toward those impacted by our ostensibly objective analyses, we must recognize the potential for additional insights when the Bible is read by other believers. Seen through other eyes, the Bible provides other connections through other texts that too often escape our own limited vision.⁶⁹

The ethics of reading and interpretation require that those who have most at stake in the outcomes actively participate as equals in the interpretive conversation. We must complement our reading with our listening, so that the planes of our responsibility to the text and of our accountability toward others can be brought into interaction. Only so can we continue something of the dynamic give-and-take that characterized the process of evolving revelation among the earliest communities of Christian believers. By definition, this process will not be unidirec-

tional, and will not always move in a "liberalizing" direction. Nonetheless, it comprises a vital aspect of our accountability to one another, in the Christian unity toward which Paul summons us.

In certain denominations today, the debates have turned deeply rancorous. This may be, in part, because they have not truly been conversations—exchanges in which all voices have equal expression and are equally heard. One of the most telling undertones of Paul's approach to Jew/gentile relations in the opening two chapters of Romans is the recognition of some arrogance on

the part of both groups, against which he has to warn both in the body of his letter. The problem is not that there were some tensions. A creative theological dynamism will always entail tensions. The point is to harness the energy of those tensions, under the reign of Christ, as part of a process of mutual speaking and hearing, in which we truly hear one another, render account to one another, and trust one another. This has happened in the most formative periods of Christian history, and under the guidance of the Spirit can certainly happen again.⁷⁰

This dynamism in the theological life and thought of the first Christians comprised only the beginnings of the conversation to which the church is called for all time. Even as theological

benchmarks continue to be established along the way, these are not grounds for stasis.

Interpretation through conversation. Sexual expression in the context of loving same-sex relationships in Christ will answer to and build upon interpretive parameters established through shared perspectives, voiced in conversations, rather than through any dominant structure of authority—ecclesiastical, academic, or other.

The second brushstroke is a double one, addressing the wellsprings of our moral life. With regard to sexual morality, the first and most important truth is the one most visible in Paul's guidance to the Corinthians. Their lives are now to be different, simply because they are now in Christ. The famous profligacy of their city, in which some of them had previously shared (1 Cor. 6:11), has no more place in their

I know and
am persuaded
in the
Lord Jesus
that nothing
is unclean
in itself.

Rom. 14:14

lives.⁷¹ Christ has lifted them above the pagan temples, to a new respect for others and for their own bodies as temples of the Spirit (6:19). This is precisely the result of their newfound freedom in Christ; they are delivered from the old enslavements. The fundamental principle of agapaic love, as Paul sets it forth (1 Cor. 13), means that there is no place for any kind of sexual immorality (*porneia*), exploitation, or idolatry in the Christian life.

Moral quality. Sexual expression in the context of loving same-sex relationships in Christ does not stand beyond the pale of divine sovereignty. Rather, as with all of holistic Christian life, it comes under the governing framework of Christian morality—with all that this implies for commitment, faithfulness, bodily discipleship, and spiritual growth.

The second aspect of this brushstroke has to do with our deliverance not only from the grip of sin and idolatry but also from ritual strictures. Paul explicitly parallels both kinds of bondage in Galatians 4:1–11, warning against replacing one with the other. In Christ, faithfulness in our sexuality, as in all things, reaches beyond codes of ceremonial purity to deeper levels of responsibility. When Paul in Romans 14 returns to these cultic issues from within his own explicitly Christian stance, he shows the way. There we see that he is less interested in the details of dietary practices or calendrical observances than in the solidarity and mutuality of the congregation. In other words, his concern on the cultic level, as on the moral level, is the same: that all of Christ's followers live in ways that express the unity of the Body. The only difference is that he gets at this via moral principles of salvation theology when dealing with our moral sinfulness, whereas on the level of cultic observances he is quite indifferent as to how his hearers negotiate their harmony.

For most of us under the banner of the new order in Christ, the ancient ritual taboos have largely been emptied; yet we still feel something of the shock Paul's readers must have felt on hearing his pronouncement, "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself" (Rom. 14:14). He is talking about matters that in the eyes of some of his fellow believers were as sensitive as homosexual practice. Yet in Christ Paul can go on to relativize the whole scheme of ceremonial purity acknowledging that ritual contamination exists in the eye of the beholder. "But it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean."

Like some of the Corinthian believers (1 Cor. 8:7), not

all in Rome know that. So Paul seeks to carry his hearers along with him as he moves them toward fuller knowledge—from a pre-Christian to a Christian stance. He obviously understands the lingering distaste on the part of some of his fellow Jewish believers; he may well share it. As far as same-sex relations are concerned, there can be little doubt that he thought of such as unworthy behavior, even this side of the Cross. But given popular understandings of the day, this may have differed only in degree from his reservations toward heterosexual marriage, which he saw primarily as an outlet for sexual passions.

So if Paul retains something of the Judaic aversion toward same-sex relations, he also retains the Judaic assignment of the matter to the level of ceremonial observance. That assignment points the direction. His open-eyed understanding of Calvary's implications, and his principled devotion to those implications as the core of his gospel, lead Paul to treat the ceremonial matters as nothing more than occasions for mutual forbearance, in Christ. The questions of dietary and other observances emerge in Romans 14 as clear parallels to the sexual issues in Romans 1. We may wish that Paul had returned to an explicit showing of how this works out in the Christian's sex life, but he is content to allow the matter to stand. In his analogies of food and festival, he has provided sufficient guideposts for the day when the church would be ready to follow through.⁷²

That day will be marked by an erasure not only of difference between Jew and Greek, but also of difference between "weak" and "strong." Whatever Paul's personal predilections may be, when it comes to matters of ritual observance he consistently positions himself with the "strong," while urging those like himself to respect the sensibilities of the "weak." Until the happy day of collective spiritual maturity, as far as the ritual observances in Romans 14 are concerned, each believer is to make up his/her own mind (14:5), and by implication, to give every other believer room to do the same.⁷³ This conclusion is obviously a major leap for many, and Paul has pressed it quite far enough for his time. It remains for us in our time to consider anew whether the Spirit is leading us further in continuation of this process.

Beyond ritual observance. Sexual expression in the context of loving same-sex relationships in Christ will be validated on the grounds of a deeper morality that goes beyond ritual observance, in the context of a faith community

that sees itself as growing in Christian understanding toward a unity that transcends "weak" and "strong."

The third brushstroke has to do with our selection of scriptural themes and passages that emerge as relevant. Our discipleship in Christ means being faithful to the Christian principles that Scripture provides to govern our sexual relations. At the same time, this very faithfulness broadens the definition and thus multiplies the lines of our accountability in Christ to scriptural mandates. Now that the issues define themselves as issues of relational responsibility and integrity, genuine morality, and agapaic love, new potentials emerge for bridges between the ancient text and our lives today.

Limiting our quest for guidance to those texts that deal explicitly with same-sex relations, especially given their focus on particular acts as viewed from perspectives of ceremonial uncleanness, proves inadequate precisely because such a limitation derives from a category error on our part. From a Christian standpoint, it is fair to ask whether our questions today about homosexuality are more naturally addressed in just those passages that point to the new levels of responsibility Christ brings into all our relationships, especially our domestic ones. Once the revolutionary message of mutuality between life partners is received, if this message is predicated on the core value of Christ's modeling and salvation, its leverage must extend across all relations. If under Christ's lordship, husband and wife are led beyond conventional cultural norms to new levels of mutuality and consideration toward one another (1 Cor. 7), ought not the same principles govern the relationships of all couples in Christ?

New perspectives; other Scriptures. Sexual expression in the context of loving, same-sex relationships in Christ manifests the qualities of mutuality, equality, respect, and consideration that derive from scriptural passages that address heterosexual couples in Christ.

While not exhaustive, these three brushstrokes suggest some characteristic features of scriptural fidelity in regard

to these issues today. Taken together, they illustrate the same spirit of accountability to fellow believers, agapiac love, profound and genuine morality, and deliverance from ceremonial law that guides all of Christian life.

Conclusion

"There is no longer Jew or Greek." The struggles among early Christians over ethnicity in all its implications were no less riveting than those we are encountering today over homosexuality. Indeed, given that issues of homoeroticism were perceived from the outset as having to do with the

distinction between Jews and gentiles, the erasure of the barriers between them, in Christ, carries implications for how we should regard same-sex relations today.

As we follow Paul's thought we see that this is not merely a matter of juxtaposing a "modern" concept of sexual orientation against an ancient one, as if we simply "know better" now. Rather, it involves coming to terms with theological developments already emerging in early Christian reflection. Precisely because in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek the symbols of ethnically defined sanctity lose their substance.

"There is no longer slave or free." In part, the Christian rejection of slavery's accompanying sexual abuses (whether across gender lines or not) may have contributed to the evolving Christian instinct that this polarity, as well, must erode in Christ.

"There is no longer male and female." With this pronouncement,

Paul's vision continues to challenge the church. Given that much of the ancient and contemporary objection to same-sex relations is predicated on the alleged confusion of this distinction, the implications of Christ's reign in this regard still summon us beyond our conventional assumptions. The biblical associations of sexism with patriarchalism should alert us to our unfinished work here.

There is no question that the Spirit's onward call, from comfortable stasis to destabilizing rethinking in line with

There is no
longer Jew
nor Greek...
slave or
free...male
and female
...for all of
you are one
in Christ
Jesus.

Gal. 3:28

Christ's rule, will continue to affront many. And I realize how readily the perspective represented in this article can be cheapened with a dismissive label of "situational ethics." But this perspective does not mean that "anything goes." For all of us, true discipleship can only mean that all aspects of our lives are gladly placed under the criteria that we have identified above: full acceptance of what Christ has done on Calvary, genuine morality, honest engagement with the Scriptures, accountability to one another, openness to new light, sincere regard for the conscience of others and for the unity of Christ's Body. If we citizens of the Kingdom are to continue our journey toward ever fuller living out of that Kingdom's values in this world, we can only seek to grow beyond the level of mechanical obedience to ordinances that Paul calls "bondage," and into the joyous discipleship that he calls "freedom" (Gal. 5:1).

How else shall we move beyond Hellenism's (admittedly increasingly reserved) acceptance of even exploitative same-sex activities, and Judaism's unqualified condemnation of every homoerotic expression (no matter what the relational context) on grounds of ethnic and ceremonial separateness? We must follow Paul's pointing; we must do what he did not fully spell out, but which he pointed us toward. If Paul doesn't get us there, he nonetheless opens up the way for us to go there in accord with his principles.

John's Gospel, the latest of the canonical lives of Jesus, still points his readers forward to the Spirit's continuing revelations in the life of the church. Among his final words to his followers, Jesus says "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (John 16:12-13). If John's Gospel, in which the new wine is better (2:10), still speaks to us today in new ways, can we now bear to hear? Jesus, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8), still reserves the right to surprise us. ■

Notes and References

1. We may be a little nervous about Jesus' dictum concerning the relation between humankind and the Sabbath in Mark 2:27, but we do accept it.
2. Among those who deny that these stories have anything to do with same-sex intentions is D. Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (New York: Longmans, 1955), 1-28, as dis-

cussed at length in John J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*, 4th ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1976, 1993), 42-50.

3. Amos 4:11; Isa. 1:9-10; 13:19; Jer. 49:18; Lam. 4:6; Ezek. 16:46, 48-49, 53, 55-56; Zeph. 2:9; Deut. 29:22; 32:32. The expression "abominable things" in Ezek. 16:50 is too broad to depend on connections with Lev. 18:22 and 20:13. So also in the New Testament: Matt. 10:15, 11:23-24; Luke 10:12, 17:29; 2 Pet. 2:6; Rev. 11:8.

4. August Klostermann in 1877 first named it the "Holiness Code" (*Heiligkeitsetz*) in light of its regular invocation of holiness formulas.

5. The term *abomination* (Heb. *to'evah*) denotes anything that is culturally or ritually forbidden in Jewish law. The Septuagint translates it with "uncleanness" (*akatharsia*) in several places, for instance Prov. 3:22, 6:16, 16:5. In Lev. 18:22, 20:13, the Septuagint uses *bdelugma*, a ritual offense.

6. This insight has enabled Mary Douglas to unlock the structures underlying the Levitical code of distinction between clean and unclean animals. See Mary Douglas, "The Abominations of Leviticus," in *Purity and Danger* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, 2002), 51-71.

7. The term *kil'ayim*, used in all three of these prohibitions, means a separate or distinct kind. Similar injunctions in Deut. 22:9-11, also forbid yoking an ox and ass together for plowing.

8. As a construction of the self, the concepts of "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" appear to arise only in the late nineteenth century. See Seward Hiltner, "Homosexuality: Psychological and Theological Perspectives," *Bulletin of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies* 3, no. 4 (1977):4. The term *sodomite* is unknown to either the Hebrew or the Greek Scriptures, even simply denoting citizens of Sodom.

9. Jesus' saying about eunuchs in Matt. 19:12, envisions three categories. It is possible that the first class, "eunuchs who have been so from birth," could be understood as males who had a physical deformity and/or whose sexual orientation was toward males. Accordingly, it is further possible that the Ethiopian officer whom Philip baptized (Acts 8:26-40) may have been an individual whom we today would call homosexual. It is also possible that the centurion's servant, who was precious to him and whom Jesus healed (Matt. 8:5-13 = Luke 7:1-10), may have been understood as serving his master in sexual as well as in other ways. Plato, *Republic* IX, 574b-c, speaks of a man's erotic love toward a young boy (*pais*, the term used in John 4:51) who has become "dear" (*entimos*) to him—the same term as used in the Lucan account.

10. Regarding the importance of the cross: "For I decided to know nothing among you, except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). In regard to freedom: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1). All scriptural quotations in this chapter are from the New Revised Standard Version (1989), except for the allusion to Gal. 3:28, in the title, which uses the familiar wording of the King James Version (1611).

11. See the juxtaposed vice and virtue lists in Gal. 5:16–24.
12. For vices: Gal. 5:19–21; 1 Cor. 5:10, 11, 6:9, 10; 2 Cor. 12:20; Rom. 1:19–31, 13:13; compare 1 Tim. 1:9, 10; 2 Tim. 3:2–5. Regarding virtues: Gal. 5:22, 23; 2 Cor. 6:6; Phil. 4:8; compare 1 Tim. 6:11. For examples of popular listings, see Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 102, n. 6, which cites Maximus of Tyre XVIII.84b; XIX.90a; *Sybillene Oracles* III.36–39; and Epictetus II.16.45, with the observation, “One finds such catalogs everywhere.”
13. Philo Judaeus, *Sacrifices of Abel and Cain* 32, comes up with a list of 147 vices.
14. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), q.v. *pornos*. Apart from vice lists, the term *pornos* is also used in Eph. 5:5, and Heb. 12:16, 13:14, as well as twice in the Septuagint (Sirach 23:17). The abstract noun *porneia* appears twenty-five times in the New Testament, including three references to the decision of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25).
15. In this arrangement, I am following Scroggs, *New Testament and Homosexuality*, 103.
16. *Ibid.*, 104–5.
17. The phenomenon of voluntary martyrdom, which soon became an issue in some congregations, was an extreme but not uncommon expression of the assertive tendency. The ecclesiastical disavowal of such spontaneous initiatives (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* IV.1) attests the practice among some who may have been motivated by desire for approval among their fellows.
18. Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 5.3. *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1912, 1959), 1:289, 291.
19. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* IX.1; *Apostolic Fathers*, 2:323.
20. The feminine cognate *malakia* is regularly used to express illness, weakness, or faint-heartedness. See Arndt and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, viz. *malakia*.
21. Dale B. Martin, “Arsenokoites and Malakos: Meanings and Consequences,” in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 125–26, finds that in Greco-Roman culture, “In fact, *malakos* more often referred to men who prettied themselves up to further their heterosexual exploits” (emphasis original). Compare 127: “The word *malakos* refers to the entire ancient complex of the devaluation of the feminine. Thus people could use *malakos* as an insult directed against men who love women too much.”
22. See, for example, James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 107.
23. “You shall not lie (*koimêthêsêi*) with a male (*arsenos*) [as with] the lying (*koitên*) of a woman” (Lev. 18:22; similarly in 20:13).
24. For this observation, I am dependent upon McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*, 52–53.
25. See Robert M. Grant, *Ad Autolycom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), cited in Martin, “Arsenokoites and Malakos,” 122.
26. Martin, “Arsenokoites and Malakos,” 120.
27. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*, 53.
28. In NRSV; the Greek text originally had no chapter or verse divisions, much less modern paragraphs.
29. As pointed out by Scroggs, *New Testament and Homosexuality*, 109–10; and Jeffrey S. Siker, “Gentile Wheat and Homosexual Christians: New Testament Directions for the Heterosexual Church,” in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality*, 142–43.
30. There are, in fact, no sexual references at this level in either paragraph. The term *ponêria* (“evil”) is better attested in the ancient manuscripts at v. 30 than is the alternative reading *porneia*, which would be a general reference to sexual immorality.
31. Plato, *Laws* 772d–e, 773b, 840c.
32. This despite the known same-sex preferences of Seneca and certain other Stoic figures.
33. The chapter “Same-Sex Love” in Adventist Forum’s forthcoming book, *Christianity and Homosexuality*, explores the theological significance of giving and receiving pleasure in the Christian life.
34. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250e.
35. Plutarch, *Erôtikos* 751c, for example, has Daphnaeus refer to pederasty as a “union contrary to nature,” in contrast to heterosexual sex. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* XIII, 565c (Egypt, c. 200 C.E.), quotes a dinner guest warning philosophers against indulging in passion that is contrary to nature.
36. This opinion is expressed as a common assumption in several Greek and Roman sources, including Plato, *Laws* 836c, 840d–e; and Plutarch, *Whether Beasts are Rational*, 990d–f.
37. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 58.
38. Used with the accusative case (as here) the preposition *para* has the basic spatial meaning of “alongside.” Used metaphorically, it typically means “against,” “contrary to,” or, more mildly, “in contradistinction to.” So used, it does sometimes carry the comparative idea of “more than.” F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature*, 9th ed., trans. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) §236.
39. At least with reference to males, in Rom. 1:27. As for females (v. 26), despite the contrary view by interpreters from St. Augustine to Daniel Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality* (Tajique, N.M.: Alamo Square, 1994, 2000), 87–89, the *homoiôs* between vv. 26 and 27 sets up a parallel between the two genders, which surely must include engagement in same-sex activities since that is what is in view here.
40. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, 110.
41. Victor Paul Furnish adduces these four points in “The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Texts in Context,” in *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, ed. Jeffrey S. Siker (Louisville, Ky.:

Westminster John Knox, 1994), 26–27. Siker recapitulates them in “New Testament Directions for the Heterosexual Church,” in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality*, 142–43.

42. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says*, 85.

43. At least with regard to adult Roman citizens, especially in passive roles. See Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, 74–75.

44. Philo Judaeus, *Special Laws* III.37, quoted in Scroggs, *New Testament and Homosexuality*, 74–75. Compare Plato, *Laws* I.636c, in Scroggs, *New Testament and Homosexuality*, 59–60.

45. For example, “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature [that is, by their nature] are not gods” (Gal. 4:8).

46. The occurrences are in Rom. 1:26; 2:14, 27; 11:21, 24; 1 Cor. 11:14; Gal. 2:15; 4:8; Eph. 2:3.

47. For example, “Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?” (1 Cor. 11:14, 15).

48. So Paul can quote with agreement the slogan of some in Corinth that “no idol in the world really exists” (1 Cor. 8:4).

49. In this, Paul’s approach is comparable to the one he adopts in Rom. 14, where he is less interested in the rightness or wrongness of one or another position regarding diet or observance of holy days than in allaying the spirit of mutual judgment that is destroying the unity of

the body of Christ.

50. Paul’s treatment, in common with the Jewish thought of his day, is utterly uninterested in distinguishing among any of the various forms of same-sex interactions that shape discussions from the Hellenistic standpoint. For the Greco-Roman world, there were male-male relations between teachers and students, between temple prostitutes and their clients, between masters and slaves. The character of these interactions certainly varied from one context to another. The Greek vocabulary itself tells the story: One could speak, for example, of a *paidērastēs* (“boy-lover”), a *kinaidos* or *erōmenos* (a beloved one), or even a *paidophthoros* (a seducer or kidnapper of boys). Thus, any particular gentile discussion tends to be about one or another of these defined interactions, rather than about an overarching topic of same-sex relations as such.

When Paul, by contrast, baldly treats the matter in terms of the act itself, his thought runs along lines of classic rabbinic casuistry—ethical judgments of specific deeds in and of themselves. Such a model essentializes all same-sex activity in ways that reflect the Jewish perspectives of Paul’s time more than those of his larger world.

51. This is not the last place in Romans where Paul will provisionally ally himself with the prejudices of his Jewish Christian hearers, in order to keep them with him. He employs similar strategies in dealing with their impatient demands.

52. Furnish, *Bible and Homosexuality*, 28, notes, “it is apparent from both the wording and the content of Paul’s remark in Romans that he

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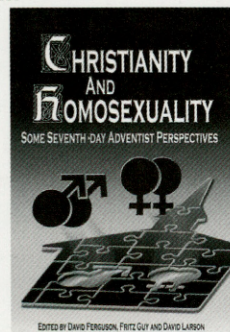
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shared the common Hellenistic-Jewish view of 'homosexuality.' There is nothing distinctively Pauline, or even Christian, about that remark. Philo himself could have written it—and so could any number of pagan moralists, given just a few changes."

53. Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex*, 115–16, points out that the "error" (*planē*) at the end of Rom. 1:27, is best understood as the gentiles' idolatry. The result, then, in accord with the rest of the passage, is the gentiles' impure passions and practices.

54. In accord with the grammatical principle that the demonstrative pronoun "such things" (*toiauta*) in v. 32 should take as its antecedent the nearest possible referent, it is the vices of 1:28–31, that deserve death, not the homogenital acts back in vv. 26–27.

55. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says*, 96; and Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex*, 116, both correctly catch the implication of the perfect participle *peplērōmenous* in v. 29. In parallel with v. 28, God surrendered the gentiles to their homoerotic practices in the wake of their profound sinfulness.

56. For example, Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 255–56, where natural law is an expression not so much of culturally defined gender roles as of the sheer physical complementarity of the sexes.

57. So Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 179. Similarly, Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*; also, Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*.

58. Part of the problem is our tendency to single out individual verses and absolutize them by reading them in isolation from their religious-cultural matrix. In the case of the Levitical materials this masks from us the larger issues of the overall attitude expressed throughout the individual prohibitions. As Gary David Comstock, *Gay Theology without Apology* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim, 1993), 63–64, says, "One looks in vain for an example of inclusive community, egalitarian principles, or a theology of loving outreach and pluralistic justice in Leviticus."

59. Dan O. Via, "The Bible, the Church, and Homosexuality," in Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 28.

60. Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex*, 117. Compare Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says*, 101.

61. M. L. Andreasen, *The Sabbath* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1942), 145, is typical of the classic line of argument among Seventh-day Adventists: "These ceremonial and temple laws terminated when the temple service ceased to be of value at the death of Christ. All Christians believe that they were abolished and annulled in the great sacrifice on Calvary. Col. 2:14. It is not of these laws that we speak, but of the law of God contained in the ten precepts. This law we believe to be of as much force as ever, and binding upon Christians and upon all men in all ages."

62. "These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ" (Col. 2:17).

63. For example, Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality I: An Introduc-*

tion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 43, traces out the notion of sexual orientation, analyzing how the construction of same-sex orientation as a clinical or psychological "disorder" first arose in the nineteenth century.

64. Siker, "Gentile Wheat and Homosexual Christians," 140.

65. The myth of human origins in Plato, *Symposium* 189c–193d, hinting at a primordial third sex oriented toward its own gender, does not refute this.

66. The point is not how relatively common or uncommon such examples are. It is enough that they do exist, and that, as will be indicated below, the Scriptures do have pertinent words to apply to such.

67. This point is prompted by the challenge presented to the Society of Biblical Literature by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, in a presidential address, "The Ethics of Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988):3–17.

68. This does not reduce the text to a mirror, merely reflecting the reader's own preconceptions. The text does exert controls, by means of its underlying structures of meaning-potential. Such potential is variously actualized, however, through varied acts of reading. Even so, the resultant meanings do have the potential to cut across a given reader's preconceptions, awakening new insights.

69. For example, Comstock, *Gay Theology*, Chap. 3, finds insightful parallels between the situation and response of Queen Vashti in the book of Esther and his experience as a homosexual male in today's society.

70. Carl S. Dudley and Earle E. Hilgert, *New Testament Tensions and the Contemporary Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) trace out the way in which deep disagreements were not papered over in the early church but were used as occasions for fuller understanding and theological advancement when the tensions were worked through with mutual respect.

71. There is some evidence that already by Paul's time a verb "to Corinthianize" (*korinthiazesthai*) had been coined to denote living in a luxurious and profligate manner.

72. That Paul and his converts saw direct parallels between issues of dietary and sexual purity is clear in 1 Cor. 6:12–20, where he argues by analogy from the former to the latter.

73. Compare Jesus: "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" (Luke 12:57). Evidently, the priesthood of every believer is to be exercised under the high priesthood of Christ, who sympathizes with our limitations (Heb. 4:15) in ways that give us courage to grow as new insights become available (5:11–14).

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