

## What the Bible Says and Doesn't Say about Homosexuality

The Bible is a drama of a good God who created a good world. A tragic fall into sin by the world's people alienated them from God. But God would not leave these people alone. God came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ, whose life, teaching, death, and resurrection overcame alienation and renewed the relationship between God and God's people.

Why do I remind you of what you know so well? The reason is that this perspective is often absent from the current debate about homosexuality in the church. That debate focuses on, at most, eight texts: Genesis 19:1–29; Judges 19:1–30; Leviticus 18:1–30; Leviticus 20:1–27; 1 Corinthians 6:9–17; 1 Timothy 1:3–13; Jude 1–25; and Romans 1. Together they cover a maximum of twelve pages in the Bible. None of these texts is about Jesus, nor do they include any of his words.

New Testament scholar Richard Hays, who teaches at Duke University Divinity School, says, "The Bible hardly ever discusses homosexual behavior. There are perhaps half a dozen references to it in all of scripture. In terms of emphasis, it is a minor concern, in contrast, for example, to economic injustice."<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, in the debate on homosexuality these texts are often taken out of their linguistic, historical, and cultural context and used to condemn a whole group of people. Only Romans 1 deals with some of the central themes of the Bible. Often those who use Romans 1 to condemn homosexuality insert nonbiblical theories to justify their position in ways that subvert the central message of the text.

Most Christians have been told at one time or another that the Bible condemns all homosexual relationships. That view is simply incorrect. For hundreds of years the Bible has been used inappropriately to oppress people who are homosexual. The eight passages I noted above are pulled out of their biblical context to justify that oppression. However, as we will see, when we apply the best methods of biblical interpretation, as derived from the Reformed confessions and adopted by the church (as discussed in the last chapter), a very different picture emerges. Let us look at those eight passages, using the guidelines for biblical interpretation presented in the last chapter.

### THE FIRST SEVEN TEXTS

#### Sodom and Gomorrah: Genesis 19:1–29 The Rape of the Levite's Concubine: Judges 19:1–30

The Old Testament stories most often cited as opposing homosexuality are (1) God's judgment on the men of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1–29 and (2) the parallel story of the rape of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19:1–30. These texts take us into an ancient Near Eastern world whose values are very different than ours. The central idea in these passages is the sacred obligation of hospitality for travelers (and the ways in which sinful people often violated this sacred obligation). In a desert country, to remain outside at night, exposed to the elements, could mean death.<sup>2</sup>

In both stories, a host invites traveling men into his house. Later an angry mob of townspeople surround the house and demand that the host turn his guests over to them. Foreigners are clearly not welcome, and the implication is that they may be raped or killed.<sup>3</sup> Daniel Helminiak, professor of psychology at the State University of West Georgia, points out that in the ancient world homosexual rape was a traditional way for victors to accentuate the subjection of captive enemies and foes. In that culture, the most humiliating experience for a man was to be treated like a woman, and raping a man was the most violent such treatment.<sup>4</sup> As Dale B. Martin, professor of religion at Duke University, says, "To be penetrated was to be inferior because women were inferior."<sup>5</sup> It is an expression of the "ancient horror of the feminine."<sup>6</sup>

In each of the stories, the host attempts to placate the threatening gangs by offering women of his household for the mob to abuse instead of his male guests. Notice the cultural emphasis on the superiority of men over women. As Old Testament scholar Martti Nissinen of the University of Helsinki notes, the critical issue in the ancient Near East was not sexuality but gender, and it was important that the superior position of men over women be maintained.<sup>7</sup> In that culture, the hosts felt that it was more important to protect male visitors in their house than to protect women, even their own daughters or common-law wife! The hosts do not seem to think of the attackers as primarily homosexual, or they would not offer women for them to abuse.

The best available scholarship shows that these texts have nothing to do with homosexuality as such. C.-L. Seow, professor of Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, points out that the sin of Sodom is

mentioned several times elsewhere in the Bible, but never in connection with homosexual acts.<sup>8</sup> In Old Testament references to Sodom, the sins of the city are variously described as greed, injustice, inhospitality, excess wealth, indifference to the poor, and general wickedness.<sup>9</sup> In the New Testament, when Jesus referred to the sin of Sodom, as recorded in Luke 10:12 and Matthew 10:15, he was passing judgment on cities that refused hospitality to his traveling disciples.<sup>10</sup> A focus on the supposed homosexual aspect of the Sodom story comes only later, in nonbiblical literature, influenced by Greek philosophy, and also in the Muslim Qur'an.<sup>11</sup>

### The Old Testament Laws: Leviticus 18 and 20

Leviticus includes a collection of laws known as the Holiness Code, so named because the dominant idea in Leviticus is God's command: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2). Two texts in this collection of laws are cited by those opposed to homosexuality as explicit prohibitions against homosexuality: Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.

The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt; they had wandered in the desert, subject to attacks from other tribes, starvation, and infectious diseases. They needed cohesiveness, cleanliness, and order in every aspect of their lives. They wanted to keep pure their manner of worshiping God, who had brought them to this land. They were struggling for their own identity. Failure to form a tight-knit community could threaten their long-term survival. They needed a code for living.

In response, they developed a Holiness Code to define their religious, civic, and cultural identity. The Holiness Code's function was to achieve the "holy purity" they sought. Its underlying theme was that they must be separate, different from the Egyptians, from whom they had escaped, and unmixed with the Canaanites, into whose land they had now come. How were they to achieve holy purity?

First, Israel's worship practices had to be different from those of the tribes or nations around them. To be like the Canaanites would make them impure, or "defiled." Phyllis Bird, professor of Old Testament at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary, notes: "Israel is enjoined not to follow the practices of the Canaanites who preceded them in the land. . . . The previous inhabitants, through their 'defiling' actions, caused the land to become defiled so that God punished the land, making it vomit out its inhabitants."<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Israel was to be faithful to God, so that they would prosper on this land.

Second, they could not mix with any other kind of people or adopt alien customs if they were to remain pure. Practically, this meant no intermarriage with non-Israelites. However, the Israelites generalized this aspect of the code to mean no mixing of any kind. Thus the Holiness Code forbids such things as sowing a field "with two kinds of seed" and wearing a garment "made of two different materials" (Lev. 19:19).<sup>13</sup>

Third, male gender superiority had to be maintained. We find in Leviticus that actions undermining male gender superiority incur the death penalty. A child who cursed his parents could be put to death, for such an act threatened the social order in a patriarchal society. Adultery was similarly punishable by death, because it was an unlawful use of a woman, who was a man's property, and therefore jeopardized lines of ownership and inheritance. Engaging in homosexual acts was punishable by death, because a man took a passive role and was penetrated, which was the role assigned to a woman.<sup>14</sup> Victor Paul Furnish, professor of New Testament at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, points out that a man penetrated was thus impure.<sup>15</sup> By, in effect, mixing genders, he had crossed a cultural boundary, and that could not be tolerated.<sup>16</sup>

It is against this background that Nissinen, Bird, and others interpret the statement, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (Lev. 18:22; cf. 20:13).<sup>17</sup> The Hebrew word *toevah*, translated as "abomination," refers here to something that makes a person ritually unclean, such as having intercourse with a woman while she is menstruating.<sup>18</sup> Ritual purity was considered necessary to distinguish the Israelites from their pagan neighbors.

Jesus was concerned with purity of heart. In Matthew 15 he said to a crowd, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles" (Matt. 15:10–11). Later he explained to his disciples: "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile" (Matt. 15:18–20).

When we see Jesus as the fulfillment of the law (Matt. 5:17), we understand that our challenge is not meticulously to maintain culturally conditioned laws, but rather, with Jesus, to love God and love our neighbor (Matt. 22:36–40). When these texts in Leviticus are taken out of their historical and cultural context and applied to faithful, God-worshipping Christians who are homosexual, it does violence to them.

They are being condemned for failing to conform to an ancient culturally conditioned code that is not applicable to them or their circumstances. Even Louisville Presbyterian Seminary New Testament professor Marion Soards, who opposes homosexuality on other grounds, agrees that "it is impossible to declare the necessary relevance of these verses for our world today."<sup>19</sup>

### New Testament Vice Lists: 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10

Opponents of equal rights for people who are homosexual also cite a pair of New Testament texts—1 Corinthians 6:9–17 and 1 Timothy 1:3–13—as informing us about homosexuality. What makes these passages distinct is that, in their original Greek, they contain two words, *arsenokoites* and *malakos*, that some scholars argue refer to male homosexual activity.<sup>20</sup> As a result, a disproportionate amount of scholarly attention has been given to these texts and these two words. But to give attention to these two words is to embark on a journey of linguistic technicality. Brian Blount, then professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, notes that the meaning of these words is not at all clear, and their reference to homosexuality as such has been challenged.<sup>21</sup> Martti Nissinen observes that both words appear in lists of vices that seem to reflect general concerns of Hellenistic Jews about the deplorable state of Greek society.<sup>22</sup>

*Arsenokoites* and *malakos* both occur in 1 Corinthians 6:9, and *arsenokoites* recurs in 1 Timothy 1:10. Because the words occur in lists with no context, it is difficult to know exactly what they mean. Compounding the situation, Nissinen notes that Paul, in the list he cites, is using *arsenokoites* for the first time ever either in Greek or Jewish literature, thus making it very difficult to interpret.<sup>23</sup>

The debate over the meaning of these words illumines the various methods that scholars use to define terms. Dale Martin disagrees with those who read the two words, *arsen* (male) and *koites* (bed), as one and thereby create a new term for men who have sex with men.<sup>24</sup> Martin objects that "this approach is linguistically invalid," using as an illustration that the English word "understand" has nothing to do with either standing or being under. He articulates an important principle: "The only reliable way to define a word is to analyze its use in as many different contexts as possible."<sup>25</sup> Martin concludes, after analyzing Greek writings both secular and Christian, that *arsenokoites* probably refers to "some kind of economic exploitation, probably by sexual means: rape or sex by eco-

conomic coercion, prostitution, pimping, or something of the sort."<sup>26</sup> He further asserts that "no one should be allowed to get away with claiming that 'of course' the term refers to 'men who have sex with other men.'"<sup>27</sup>

The term *malakos* is somewhat easier to understand because it is a common word. It literally means "soft" and often connotes effeminacy, which in that culture was treated as a moral failing. Nissinen observes that, in the patriarchal culture of the time, lack of self-control and yielding to pleasures were both considered signs of effeminacy.<sup>28</sup> Contemporary scholars would rightly be embarrassed to invoke effeminacy as a moral category today. Unfortunately, however, as Martin laments, translating biblical terms on the assumption that all homosexual behavior is sinful is not yet embarrassing.<sup>29</sup>

In 1 Timothy 1:10, which many scholars date later than Paul's work, *arsenokoitēs* appears in a list of vices.<sup>30</sup> The NRSV translates it with the ambiguous word "sodomites." Victor Furnish notes that the word "sodomite" is not used in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, not even to mean "a resident of Sodom." It was introduced in English in a half dozen Old Testament passages in the King James Version of the Bible in 1611. Nor does the word appear in the Greek text of the New Testament.<sup>31</sup> In 1 Timothy 1:10, "the fact that *arsenokoitai* [the plural of *arsenokoitēs*, which the NRSV translates as "sodomites"] is followed by slave traders, a group who exploited others, adds weight to Martin's evidence for *arsenokoitai* as sexual exploiters of some sort, since the vices in the lists were often grouped according to their similarity to other vices in the list."<sup>32</sup>

Nissinen argues, "The modern concept of 'homosexuality' should by no means be read into Paul's text, nor can we assume that Paul's words in I Corinthians 6:9 'condemn all homosexual relations' in all times and places and ways. The meanings of the word are too vague to justify this claim, and Paul's words should not be used for generalizations that go beyond his experience and world."<sup>33</sup> Many scholars, such as Marion Soards, believe that "only indirectly may we derive information regarding homosexuality from this material."<sup>34</sup> Once again, careful attention to the linguistic, historical, and cultural context has led to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the plain text.

### Jude 5–7

The Letter of Jude consists of only one chapter, which runs just over one page and comes right before the book of Revelation. Very few writers

pay much attention to this brief and obscure book. Yet New Testament scholar Thomas E. Schmidt, who is director of the Westminster Center in Santa Barbara, California, claims that the book of Jude makes reference to homosexuality.<sup>35</sup>

The Letter of Jude is the only book of the Bible that relates the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah to "sexual immorality." Schmidt, however, makes the broad claim that "the first Christians undoubtedly connected the sin of Sodom to the sin of same-sex relations."<sup>36</sup> The situation is, however, much more complex.

In Genesis 6:1–4 angels ("sons of God") are described as coming down to earth to have sex with human women ("daughters of humans").<sup>37</sup> When Jude 6 refers to "angels who did not keep their own position," it is believed by most scholars that he is referring to events in Genesis 6:1–4. In Genesis 19:1–29 Lot's guests are also described as angels.

Jude 7 draws a parallel between the "unnatural lust" of angels who wanted to have sex with human women (Gen. 6:1–4) and the men of Sodom who wanted to have sex with (male) angels (Gen. 19:1–29).<sup>38</sup> Jude writes that for their transgressions the Lord has kept the angels "in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great day" (v. 6). Likewise, the men of Sodom suffered "a punishment of eternal fire" (v. 7).

As one can see, in Jude there is a lot of discussion about sex between humans and angels (angels with human women, and human men with male angels) that is labeled as "sexual immorality" and "unnatural lust." But for Schmidt, or anyone else, to make the leap that this text somehow condemns present-day Christians who are homosexual strikes me as bizarre. In studying the seven texts that are often cited in opposition to homosexuality, we discover a significant body of scholarship that concludes that these texts have no direct application to faithful, God-loving, twenty-first-century Christians who are homosexual. What is more, this scholarly consensus includes many people who have traditionally opposed equal rights for people who are homosexual, such as scholars Richard Hays and Marion Soards. That leaves just one text, Romans 1.

## ROMANS 1

The conflict over the meaning of biblical texts becomes acute when we look at Romans 1. Some conservative scholars who dismiss the relevance of the seven previously discussed texts to the issue of homosexuality

argue that Romans 1 is a theological statement that has direct application for our time. I believe, however, that a close and careful look at the text, using the best methods of biblical interpretation, will reveal that Paul is making a statement about idolatry, not sexuality per se, and that Paul's writings also reflect many of the cultural assumptions of his time.

Paul's thesis statement for his letter to the Romans comes in Romans 1, verse 16: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." The very next sentence states that thesis in another way: "The one who is righteous will live by faith" (Rom. 1:17). No one is excluded from the possibility of receiving God's salvation. The gospel that Paul is proclaiming in Romans does not center on the issue of sexuality. It focuses on the universality of sin and the free grace of salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the essence of the Christian message.

### Idolatry, Not Sexuality

In Romans 1:18–32, Paul is writing about idolatry, that is, worshiping, giving our ultimate allegiance to anything in the creation instead of God, the Creator.<sup>39</sup> Paul is writing from Corinth, a bustling seaport town that was "notorious for vice of all kinds." Apparently, in the Roman Empire a common name for a prostitute was "a Corinthian girl."<sup>40</sup> Paul writes of people worshiping "images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles" (v. 23)—instead of God. Paul concluded that because the Corinthians engaged in idolatry, "God gave them up to degrading passions" (v. 26).

It seems as though Paul is setting up his Jewish readers. It is easy at this point in the text for them, and for us, to feel self-righteous. Jews didn't worship images of birds or animals or reptiles. Those were typical Gentile sins. But then Paul lowers the boom on his readers by listing other sins that proceed from idolatry—covetousness, malice, envy, strife, deceit, craftiness, gossip, slander. Idolaters could become haughty, boastful, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Now Paul is talking to all of us, speaking to those sins of attitude to which we sometimes succumb when we turn our ultimate allegiance away from the true God.

Paul makes this point again, in Romans 2:1. We are without excuse, especially when we judge others. Why? Because in God's sight we are all

given to idolatry. Paul is driving home the point that is at the heart of Reformation theology: no one is righteous before God. Paul has been criticizing those idolatrous Corinthian Gentiles. Now he is saying to his Jewish colleagues, and to us, No one is righteous. We are all sinners. That is Paul's point in Romans 1.

### Cultural Norms, Not a Theology of Creation

What does Paul mean by "natural" and "unnatural" in Romans 1:26–27? In the original Greek, the words are *physis*, "nature," and *para physin*, "against nature."<sup>41</sup>

For Paul, "unnatural" is a synonym for "unconventional."<sup>42</sup> It means something surprisingly out of the ordinary. The most significant evidence that "natural" meant "conventional" is that God acted "contrary to nature" (Rom. 11:13–24). That is, God did something very unusual by pruning the Gentiles from a wild olive tree, where they grew in their natural state, and grafting them into the cultivated olive tree of God's people (Rom. 11:24). Since it cannot be that God sinned, to say that God did what is "contrary to nature" or "against nature" (v. 24) means that God did something surprising and out of the ordinary.<sup>43</sup>

Paul is not talking in Romans 1:26–27 about a violation of the order of creation. In Paul's vocabulary, *physis* (nature) is not a synonym for *ktisis* (creation). In speaking about what is "natural," Paul is merely accepting the conventional view of people and how they ought to behave in first-century Hellenistic-Jewish culture.<sup>44</sup>

### Male Gender Dominance

The theme of male gender dominance appears again and again in the texts that many claim deal with homosexuality, including Romans 1. Both the Hebrew and the Greek cultures were patriarchal. Men were, and intended to remain, dominant over women. Paul assumes the conventions of these cultures that he is addressing. He uses terms familiar in the Greek-speaking synagogues such as "impurity" (1:24) and "shameless" (1:27), which are part of the Jewish language of purity. And he is equally familiar with terms that are rooted in Greek Stoic philos-

ophy, such as "lusts" (1:24) and "passions" (1:26), which denote erotic passion and uncontrolled desire.<sup>45</sup>

In Romans 1:26, Paul writes: "Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural." As Nissinen notes, the phrase "their women" is a clear indication of a gender role structure.<sup>46</sup> But, he contends, "Paul's understanding of the naturalness of men's and women's gender roles is not a matter of genital formation and their functional purpose, which today is considered by many the main criterion for the natural and unnatural."<sup>47</sup> Rather, in the culture Paul is addressing, a man and a woman each had a designated place and role in society, which could not be exchanged. For example, Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:3–16 outlines a strict hierarchical ladder of God-Christ-man-woman. Strict gender role differences are set out, manifested by different hairstyles. Paul asks, "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). In that culture, to violate these roles would be a matter of shame before God.<sup>48</sup>

For Paul, transgressions of gender role boundaries cause "impurity," a violation of the Jewish purity code (Rom. 1:24).<sup>49</sup> Nissinen explains that it is women taking the man's active role in sex that was seen as "unnatural."<sup>50</sup> The text does not say that women had sex with other women. They could have been condemned for taking the dominant position in heterosexual intercourse, or for engaging in nonprocreative sexual acts with male partners.<sup>51</sup> The issue is gender dominance, and in that culture women were to be passive and not active in sexual matters.

### Control and Moderation in All Things

In Hebrew culture and in Stoic philosophy (which was influential in the Roman Empire, particularly in Greece, during Paul's time), control and moderation in all things were highly valued, especially regarding emotion and sexuality. Going to excess—whether eating too much, sleeping too much, or giving in to excessive passion of any kind—was viewed as a moral failing.<sup>52</sup> The goal was to make correct "use" of all things. The "natural use" of sex was to be very controlled, avoiding passion.<sup>53</sup> Paul in Romans 1:26–27 would be rightly understood to be talking not about wrongly oriented desires, but about inordinate desires—going to excess, losing control.<sup>54</sup> Idolaters fail to give God

glory and gratitude. God then allows them to lose control in erotic passion, which brings them dishonor.<sup>55</sup>

### The Plain Text

Those who are opposed to equal rights for Christian gay and lesbian people make several serious errors in interpreting Romans 1: (1) they lose sight of the fact that this passage is primarily about idolatry, (2) they overlook Paul's point that we are all sinners, (3) they miss the cultural subtext, and (4) they apply Paul's condemnation of immoral sexual activity to faithful gay and lesbian Christians who are not idolaters, who love God, and who seek to live in thankful obedience to God.

Heterosexual sex can be either moral or immoral, depending on its context. The same is true of homosexual sex. If Paul walked into a party at the Playboy Mansion today or observed college students "hooking up" at a fraternity party, he would be appalled and rightly condemn the activities going on there. But no one would conclude from that observation that Paul had ruled out all heterosexual sex as immoral. Everyone would understand that Paul was not talking about married Christian heterosexual couples who love God and seek to follow Jesus.

Paul's condemnation of immoral sexual behavior is not appropriately applied to contemporary gay or lesbian Christians who are not idolaters, who love God, and who seek to live in thankful obedience to God. I think Jeffrey Siker, professor of New Testament at Loyola Marymount University, says it best: "We know of gay and lesbian Christians who truly worship and serve the one true God and yet still affirm in positive ways their identity as gay and lesbian people. Paul apparently knew of no homosexual Christians. We do."<sup>56</sup>

### NONBIBLICAL THEORIES IMPOSED UPON ROMANS 1

Those who oppose homosexuality claim that they are appealing to Romans 1. Upon closer examination, it is clear that many are imposing their own nonbiblical theories on the Pauline text. The most common additions to the plain text of Romans 1 are (1) appeals to natural law and (2) the assumption that Genesis somehow contains a prescription for heterosexual, monogamous marriage. These are *not* necessary to understand Paul's basic point in Romans 1 that all are sinners and are

saved by grace through faith in Christ. Let us examine these theories that are imported into Romans 1, and other texts, in an attempt to justify the condemnation of all contemporary homosexuality. A number of subissues under natural law and heterosexual marriage may seem out of place in a discussion of Romans 1, but I present them here because they are assumptions that, when brought to Romans 1, distort the interpretation of Paul's message.

### Natural Law

One argument made by conservative interpreters is that we can be guided by a nonbiblical standard, natural law. Natural law is composed of those unquestioned assumptions that most people in the culture accept. Ralph McInerny at the University of Notre Dame defines natural law as "the claim that there are certain judgments we have already made and could not help making."<sup>57</sup> The problem is that this could also be a good definition for prejudice.<sup>58</sup>

The unreflective appeal to nature is exemplified by a remark of fundamentalist minister Jerry Falwell. On *Meet the Press* following the November 2004 presidential election, Falwell, pushing his priorities for President Bush's second term, said, "I think it's unthinkable that we're debating what a family is, a man married to a woman. They've got that right in the barnyard." In his colorful manner of speaking, Falwell appealed to what, to him, was obvious in nature—animals have sexual relations, male with female.<sup>59</sup> That model of nature is an often-used appeal to natural law.

As it turns out, however, not all animals are heterosexual. Biologist Bruce Bagemihl has documented homosexual relations in 450 different species in the animal world. Same-sex behavior includes not only copulation, but also courtship and parental activities.<sup>60</sup> I am not arguing here that we should base our understanding of sex on animal behavior, but, rather, pointing out that those who do, citing male-female relations as universal in nature, are in error.

As we saw in chapter 2 in the discussion of Scottish Common Sense philosophy, theologians often appeal to natural law in an attempt to argue divine sanction for their cultural assumptions. A classic example of the misuse of natural law in theology is Robert Gagnon's *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*.<sup>61</sup> Gagnon is a professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. His book is

acclaimed by some opponents of gay and lesbian equality as the definitive biblical word on homosexuality.

The irony is that Gagnon doesn't seem to need the Bible because, he argues, everything the Bible says about homosexuality comes initially from the observation of nature. In fact, in the conclusion to his book, Gagnon actually says what many heterosexual people believe: "Acceptance of biblical revelation is thus not a prerequisite for rejecting the legitimacy of same-sex intercourse."<sup>62</sup> So where does he believe the constraints against homosexual behavior are found? As it turns out, behind all of the ancient sources, including biblical sources, according to Gagnon, is "the simple recognition of a 'fittedness' of the sex organs, male to female."<sup>63</sup> He goes on to say that the Old Testament Holiness Code "was responding to the conviction that same-sex intercourse was fundamentally incompatible with the creation of men and women as anatomically complementary sexual beings."<sup>64</sup> He also refers to "Paul's own reasoning, grounded in divinely-given clues in nature."<sup>65</sup> In each of these statements, Gagnon gives priority to nature over revelation.

According to Gagnon, pagans, as well as Jews and Christians, find "the material creation around human beings and the bodily design of humans themselves, guiding us into the truth about the nature of God and the nature of human sexuality respectively."<sup>66</sup>

The contemporary appeal to natural law, by Gagnon and others, has a function similar to Scottish Common Sense philosophy in an earlier era. Both contend that the truth is obvious. Both rely heavily on sensory evidence. Both assume that no interpretation is needed. Both therefore assert common human prejudices as self-evident truths. Giving priority to natural law opens the door to bring in all manner of assumptions and prejudices that have nothing to do with the biblical text. Let's take a close look at some of Gagnon's assumptions.

### 1. Sexual Orientation: A Choice?

Relying on his inaccurate assumptions about what is "natural," Gagnon claims, "Certainly no one is born a homosexual."<sup>67</sup> Clearly there is no biblical warrant for this statement. In fact, Jesus, immediately after his teaching on divorce and his recommendation of marriage, states that some people are born eunuchs (Matt. 19:10–12). In the NEB these people are described as "incapable of marriage" (Matt. 19:12). In ancient time, there no doubt were people who were incapable of heterosexual sexual activity and thus were considered "eunuchs." Old Testament scholar Martti Nissi-

nen suggests that in our contemporary context those who are eunuchs from their mother's wombs might well include people who are homosexuals, because they simply lack sexual desire for people of the opposite sex.<sup>68</sup>

There is also no scientific warrant for Gagnon's claim. In a comprehensive review of the literature on the subject of sexual orientation, David G. Myers, professor of psychology at Hope College, observes that based on all the available evidence, most psychologists "view sexual orientation as neither willfully chosen nor willfully changed."<sup>69</sup> I will discuss this more fully in chapter 6.

### 2. Can People Who Are Homosexual Become Heterosexual?

Having asserted that no one is homosexual by nature, Gagnon claims that all people who are homosexual have willfully chosen that behavior and therefore can successfully change their sexual identity. Once again there is no biblical or scientific warrant for that position. When all of the studies and the testimony have been sifted, it is apparent that when people claim that lesbian and gay people can change, they are almost always referring to behavior and not orientation. In fact, when you probe beyond the assertions, Gagnon acknowledges that "therapists define *success* as management of unwanted desires, not complete elimination."<sup>70</sup> Thomas Schmidt, who supports traditional limits on homosexuals in the church, concludes: "As numerous books by ministry leaders show, their focus is on changed behavior, [and] they are honest about the probability of ongoing temptation."<sup>71</sup> Even Andrew Comiskey, a prominent "ex-gay," agrees. He uses two friends, Karen and Jim, to illustrate his point. He says of them, "Neither can choose not to have homosexual feelings anymore than heterosexuals can deny their impulse for the opposite sex."<sup>72</sup>

By acknowledging that "reparative" or "conversion" therapy is addressing only behavior rather than orientation, opponents of homosexuality are actually admitting that, in fact, sexual orientation is a part of someone's nature and may be just as God-given as heterosexuality. David Myers, in his review of the scientific literature on sexual orientation, concludes, "Sexual orientation is like handedness: Most people are one way, some are the other. A very few are truly ambidextrous. Regardless, the way one is endures."<sup>73</sup>

When people who are homosexual are able to accept their orientation, it frees them to find a loving partner of their own sex and experience the joy of companionship, just as heterosexuals do in a marriage.

The church should celebrate such unions, rather than imposing unbiblical and unscientific assumptions upon this group of people.

### 3. Is Homosexuality Idolatry?

Since Gagnon claims, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, that homosexuality is a willful choice, he then proceeds to *define* same-sex intercourse *as* idolatry.<sup>74</sup> His definition makes sense only if you *start* with the *assumption* that homosexuality is sinful. If, on the other hand, you start with the question of whether people who are homosexual are idolatrous, you could simply speak with real Christian people who are gay and lesbian and quickly discover that in fact they love Jesus and seek to serve God. The debate would be over.

Gagnon does not deal with how real Christian gay and lesbian people express their love for each other or their love for God. He does not acknowledge the devout Christian people who are living in faithful, monogamous same-sex unions. Instead, he has created his own theoretical model of idolatrous sex and then claims that it applies to all people who are homosexual.

Moreover, Gagnon does not demonstrate that the immoral sexual relations Paul condemns are related to the love of contemporary faithful gay and lesbian Christians. He simply asserts it. The lives of Christian people who are homosexual refute Gagnon's assertions. If one takes the time to know real Christian people who are homosexual, one finds that their love is not any more lustful than that of people who are heterosexual, nor is it motivated by idolatry.

Jesus dealt with real people in the midst of their daily lives. He didn't start with culturally biased assumptions and then use them as a club to punish those who were not like him. Rather, he went to the people and helped them develop a closer relationship with God. If we start with Jesus and seek to follow him, we will then be guided to deal with real people and endeavor to help everyone know and serve God.

### 4. Homosexual Relationships: The Worst Sin of All?

The conclusion of Gagnon's chain of reasoning, based on his appeal to natural law, is twofold: (1) lesbian and gay sexual relations are sinful as such; and (2) they are the worst sin of all. Gagnon declares that, on the basis of observation of nature, we can know that all same-sex intercourse is the "road that leads to death: physically, morally, and spiritually."<sup>75</sup> He

simply asserts, with no supporting evidence, that sexual relations between contemporary Christian people who are homosexual are sinful as such.

Secondly, he argues, "we all sin but not all sin is equally offensive to God and not all sin is to be treated in the same way."<sup>76</sup> In fact, however, that is the exact opposite of what Paul argues in Romans 1:29–32! Paul declares that *all* of the sins that he lists, not just immoral sexual relations, are worthy of death. Gagnon may choose to take a position in opposition to Paul, but he cannot claim to be biblical in doing so.

Given Gagnon's assumption that homosexual behavior will cause a person to be excluded from the kingdom of God, it seems reasonable then to conclude that, for him, a prerequisite to salvation is to imitate heterosexual behavior or be celibate. That would of course contradict Paul's view that all are sinners, that no one is saved by works, and that all can be saved by God's grace.

### Homosexuality an Example of the Fallenness of Humanity?

Richard Hays, writing on New Testament sexual ethics, takes a mediating, yet conservative, position on the consequences of God's judgment in Romans. He writes, "Paul is not describing the individual life histories of pagan sinners; not every pagan has first known the true God of Israel and then chosen to turn away into idolatry. When Paul writes: 'They exchanged the truth about God for a lie,' he is giving a global account of the universal fall of humanity."<sup>77</sup> Hays then asserts that "Paul singles out homosexual intercourse for special attention because he regards it as providing a particularly graphic image of the way in which human fallenness distorts God's created order."<sup>78</sup>

One of the problems with this argument is that either humanity's fall is universal or it is not. You cannot argue that everyone is fallen (the essential Christian message) and then go on to single out particular groups of people as extra-fallen. Furthermore, like Gagnon, Hays is making huge assumptions about what God intended to create. As I have already shown, examples from the animal kingdom seem to show that God pretty clearly did intend to create homosexual animals. Furthermore, the best scientific evidence also seems to show a genetic influence on sexual orientation, as well as biological differences between homosexual and heterosexual people. This data suggests that homosexuality is indeed part of God's created order.<sup>79</sup>

For Hays, God's "created order" includes a prescription for heterosexual marriage as the only acceptable context for sexual intercourse.

He declares, "Marriage between man and woman is the normative form for human sexual fulfillment, and homosexuality is one among the many tragic signs that we are a broken people, alienated from God's loving purpose."<sup>80</sup> Again, by singling out a particular group of people, Hays is contradicting the essential Christian message that we are *all* broken people, saved through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, while I too believe that monogamous marriage is the best context for human sexual fulfillment, as I will show in the following section, there is no particular scriptural warrant for monogamous *heterosexual* marriage as the norm for all people.<sup>81</sup>

### A Model of Monogamous Heterosexual Marriage in Genesis?

Many who would like to use Romans 1 to oppose equal rights for people who are homosexual ground their position in the creation accounts in Genesis 1–2. The argument goes something like this: homosexual relations are against nature, because they are contrary to the pattern placed within creation.<sup>82</sup> What is that pattern? According to some, like Thomas Schmidt, it is monogamous, heterosexual, marriage.<sup>83</sup> However, Genesis 1–2 contains no reference to homosexuality or marriage. These chapters were not written to answer the questions that are now being put to them.

As Old Testament scholar Phyllis Bird notes, the laws and traditions that regulated sexual relations and marriage in ancient Israel *never* referred to the creation texts as models.<sup>84</sup> Genesis 1, she argues, actually describes how humans are like and unlike God. People are made in God's image and likeness, so they are separate from and superior to other animals. But in their sexuality, they are identified as male and female, not as husband and wife, or even man and woman. Victor Furnish further reminds us that in contrast to all of the ancient Near Eastern deities, Israel's God was regarded as *asexual*.<sup>85</sup> Thus in their sexuality, humankind is *like* every other created species and *unlike* God.<sup>86</sup>

Indeed, Furnish asserts that Genesis 2:23–25 "neither commands nor presumes a 'monogamous' relationship between man and woman and . . . it offers no comment on 'marriage' as such."<sup>87</sup> Moreover, Old Testament heroes of the faith certainly did *not* model monogamy, but rather followed the patterns of their culture, with multiple wives, concubines, and slaves as sexual partners. The Bible not only approves but also appears to mandate such behavior. However, as Furnish notes, the prescription to "be fruitful and multiply" cannot mean that everyone must marry and

reproduce, for the creation stories "take no account whatever of the physically or mentally impaired, the celibate, the impotent—or of those who in modern times have come to be described as 'homosexual.'"<sup>88</sup>

This notion that a model of monogamous, heterosexual marriage is somehow contained in Genesis 1 is simply not true. It appears to be an artificial construct designed to deny the rights of marriage to those who are homosexual. As David Balch, professor of New Testament at Brite Divinity School, observes, where a theology of creation is stressed, as by those opposed to equality for gays and lesbians, "subordination and submission are usually emphasized."<sup>89</sup> On the other hand, where a theology of redemption, such as Paul offers in Romans 3, is stressed, "freedom, mutuality, and equality are usually emphasized."<sup>90</sup>

I think that the contemporary model of Christian marriage is a good one for heterosexual people: one man and one woman should marry for life and, if they choose, bear and care for children. This model is not found in Genesis, however. Moreover, it took Western society many centuries to come to it,<sup>91</sup> and even so, half of the heterosexual people in American society do not follow it. On the other hand, many Christian gay and lesbian people have committed themselves to one lifelong partner. Many care for children, and some that I know have adopted children with special needs. They seem to have gotten the point of the contemporary Christian model of marriage and are living it out.

### Reuniting the Binary Split?

An extreme version of the notion that salvation is found only in the uniting of male and female is found in Robert Gagnon's work. He renders the Genesis story in this way:

In Gen. 2:18–24, a binary or sexually undifferentiated human (the *adam*) is split into two sexually differentiated beings. Marriage is treated by the Yahwist as a reunion of the sexual unity of the original *adam*. One can no more dismiss the story's implicit relevance for proscriptions of same-sex intercourse than one can dismiss its pertinence for attitudes against bestiality (cf. 2:20). . . . Two males or two females in sexual union would not equal an originally binary being or sexual whole.<sup>92</sup>

Interestingly, in Plato's *Symposium* a similar myth of an original whole being divided is presented by an intoxicated Aristophanes. Originally there were three kinds of beings, a male, a female, and an androgyon

that shared equally in the male and female. Zeus sliced these beings in half, and each searched for its counterpart in order to become whole again by having sexual relations. The beings of androgynous origin would have heterosexual desires, the male half searching to be reunited with the female half. Aristophanes observes, "Our adulterers are mostly descended from that sex, whence likewise are derived our man-courting women and adulteresses."<sup>93</sup> It's a curious theory, but once again, there is simply no biblical warrant for that position.

### The Male-Female Relationship as the Image of God in Humanity?

The Presbyterian Confession of 1967, which was influenced by the theological method of Karl Barth (see the discussion of neo-orthodoxy in chapter 3), became a significant source in the struggle to overcome prejudice against people of color and, by analogy, women.<sup>94</sup> Yet in 1978 the United Presbyterian Task Force on Homosexuality noted Barth's opposition to full equality for gay and lesbian people.<sup>95</sup> Unfortunately, Barth, like many others, made an exception to his usual method of interpreting Scripture when it came to the issue of gender and homosexuality.

Appealing to his interpretation of natural law and the false assumption that there is a model for heterosexual marriage in Genesis, Barth wrote, "Man is directed to woman and woman to man; . . . this mutual orientation constitutes the being of each."<sup>96</sup> According to Barth's view, being fully human is known only in the male-female relationship, and the marriage relationship is the fullest expression of the image of God in human beings.<sup>97</sup>

Like others who rely on natural law, Barth was biased in favor of the male gender. According to Barth, in the marriage relationship, the husband reflects Jesus and the wife reflects the Christian community. "She is," Barth wrote, "subordinated to her husband as the whole community is to Christ."<sup>98</sup>

In his analysis, Barth engaged in the sort of natural theology he usually condemned by appealing to what he referred to as "a little knowledge of life."<sup>99</sup> By making an argument on the basis of what he considered "natural," Barth departed from the biblical text and instead inserted his own culturally conditioned opinions. As Elouise Renich Fraser, professor of theology and dean at Palmer Theological Seminary, comments: "By making marriage the epitome of co-humanity, Barth places some human relationships automatically under suspicion, excludes some human beings from the possibility of full humanity, and reinforces old

stereotypes of male and female, thus failing to help his readers hear the old story with new ears."<sup>100</sup> Barth's firm commitment to male gender superiority causes him to reject all homosexual relationships.<sup>101</sup>

Today many Protestants repeat Barth's assertion that monogamous, heterosexual marriage is the exemplification of the image of God in humanity and use that to oppose full membership in the church for people who are homosexual. Barth's view has also become one basis for attempts to change people who are homosexual into people who are heterosexual. For example, "ex-gay" Andrew Comiskey echoes Barth when he claims, "God also tells us that to discover our true humanity, we must be known by the opposite sex. A fundamental part of our bearing the divine image is its heterosexual reflection. God created man in His image as 'male and female' (Gen. 1:26-27)."<sup>102</sup> It sounds very much as if Comiskey is saying that we have to engage in heterosexual sex in order to be fully human, which would be a breathtaking misinterpretation of Paul's message in Romans 1.

The claim that the image of God is rooted in the male-female relationship leads us away from the biblical text. When I was on the task force on homosexuality at Pasadena Presbyterian Church, one of our members, a former missionary with a PhD in New Testament, argued in favor of the Barthian view that a person was not fully human unless in a heterosexual marriage. His argument offended various committee members, including a never-married woman who was a former missionary. Our one gay member quietly said, "That sure makes it hard on Jesus."

Biblically speaking, Jesus Christ *is* the image of God (Col. 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4). But the image of God in Jesus was not a consequence of some unique human attribute, like maleness or marital status. It was rather the result of his reflecting the love of God fully in his life. We human beings reflect God's love only sporadically and partially, whereas Jesus showed us God's love consistently and wholly.

The gospel, the good news, is that all people can have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We reflect Christ's presence in our lives by showing love for God and each other. Thus, the image of God is not a capacity embodied only in some classes of people but denied to others. To be in God's image is possible for all—black and white, male and female, gay and straight, married and unmarried.

We need to return to a biblical understanding of God, creation, sin, salvation, and love. Those who rely instead on natural law and biased cultural assumptions twist and distort the fundamental message of the gospel.

There are around three thousand verses in the Bible that express God's concern for the poor and oppressed.<sup>103</sup> In contrast, there is a tiny handful of verses that some people claim condemn homosexuality. None of them, properly interpreted, refers to contemporary Christian people who are homosexual.

### A RELEVANT BIBLICAL ANALOGY

The acceptance of people who are homosexual is grounded in the central message of Scripture as interpreted through the lens of Jesus' life and ministry. In addition, there are specific biblical passages that show the church changing its mind and accepting people who previously were considered unclean and unacceptable. Perhaps the most instructive is the long narrative in Acts 10–15 that records how the church opened itself to receive Gentiles on whom God's Spirit had fallen, without requiring them to behave like Jews.

That narrative culminates in Acts 15, at a gathering that is usually referred to as the Council of Jerusalem. (I sometimes ask Presbyterians to think of it as their first General Assembly.) Certain individuals from the "sect of the Pharisees" resisted the new reality and insisted that in order to be saved, it was necessary for men to be circumcised and all people to keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:5).

However, both Peter and Paul had admitted Gentiles to the church solely on the basis that the Holy Spirit had been given to these non-Jews. These Gentiles did not have to meet any of the former Jewish requirements. Indeed, Peter challenged the church leaders in Jerusalem: "Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?" (Acts 15:10).

So the council members listened to testimony by Peter and then by Paul and Barnabas. Peter recounted a vision that came to him when he was in a trance. God gave him a new revelation, that there were no clean and unclean people in God's sight. Gentiles were not unclean as a class and thus were not to be excluded from full participation in the church. Peter said, "God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us" (Acts 15:8–9). Paul and Barnabas told of signs and wonders that God had done among the Gentiles. God was doing a new thing.

After hearing the testimony of those who had been working among the Gentiles, James gave an authoritative interpretation. He gave weight to the words of Peter, "We will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (15:11). He saw a continuity of the new reality with biblical Judaism. James interpreted the prophet Amos (9:11–12) to say that God had always purposed the conversion of the Gentiles. Now the church had experienced what God had planned.<sup>104</sup>

Luke Timothy Johnson, professor of New Testament at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, challenges us, "Remember please, the stakes: The Gentiles were 'by nature' unclean, and were 'by practice' polluted by idolatry. . . . The decision to let the Gentiles in 'as such' . . . came into direct conflict with the accepted interpretation of Torah and what God wanted of humans."<sup>105</sup> Johnson thus affirms that the question of accepting people who are homosexual as full members of the church "is analogous to the one facing earliest Christianity after Gentiles started being converted."<sup>106</sup> New Testament scholar Jeffrey Siker, accepting that analogy, gives his testimony: "Just as Peter's experience of Cornelius in Acts 10 led him to realize that even Gentiles were receiving God's Spirit, so my experience of various gay and lesbian Christians led me to realize that these Christians have received God's Spirit as gays and lesbians and that the reception of the Spirit has nothing to do with sexual orientation."<sup>107</sup>

In the next chapter we will interact, not with theoretical stereotypes, but with real people who are homosexual. These real people evidence a commitment to Jesus Christ, in spite of continuing persecution from society and the misguided policies of many Christian churches. The Christians who are homosexual whom I know show a profound love for Jesus and a deep commitment to marriage and the care of children.

Let's get to know them.