

Process and References

for studying

The Question of Homosexuality

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Guidelines for Dialogue Among Christians

1. Keep the conversation civil and respectful of one another. This is not a debate or an argument.
2. Be succinct and brief. Think about what you want to say before speaking. You want to share the floor with others, and wait for everyone to have the opportunity to speak before you speak again.
3. Don't interrupt others when they are speaking.
4. Speak only for yourself. Don't generalize about everyone. Use "I" statements.
5. Be a good listener. You seek to understand, rather than agree.
6. Don't try to "win" or "prove someone else is wrong."
7. In order to get to deeper meanings and clearer understandings of a person's viewpoint, ask clarifying questions.
8. Keep yourself open to new ideas.
9. Respond by sharing and inquiring, not by defending or proclaiming. If you find yourself becoming defensive or reactive, stop and disengage.
10. Do not applaud or show other signs of agreement or disagreement when someone is speaking.
11. Enjoy the dialogue and remember we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

GROUND RULES

The Illinois South Conference Committee on Church and Ministry recommends the following ground-rules for congregational discussion of Christianity and homosexuality:

1. The purpose of this discussion is to seek Biblical and theological understanding. While psychological, sociological and biological disciplines are relevant to our topic, differing conclusions can be drawn from them, and they are not the Church's primary authority. We seek the mind of Christ, and thus the unity of the Church, on this potentially divisive matter.
2. When disagreement is voiced, it is fundamentally important for all to recognize that the participants in the debate are Christians seeking to be loyal to their own convictions thus far. Church members are brothers and sisters in Christ, not warriors from opposing turfs.
3. From earliest Christian times, the mind of Christ is not necessarily discovered by vote, which settles only how a majority and a minority decide on a specific question. Votes create winners and losers, and may divide rather than unite the Church. The democratic method and parliamentary procedure may serve the purpose of keeping institutional- order, but we shouldn't infer that a numerical majority, by strength of numbers, is more in conformity to the mind of Christ than is the minority.
4. It should be a requirement of all participants in the discussion that the materials furnished by the Committee on Church and Ministry be read in advance, so that all participants are equally equipped for the discussion.
5. Each person participating in this discussion is on a life-long journey of faith. Each is at a personal way station, at the moment, on perplexing life questions. No one on this side of the Realm of God has yet arrived at a point of absolute certainty. Therefore humility is always appropriate Christian behavior.

Homosexuality and the Bible

Walter Wink

Sexual issues are tearing our churches apart today as never before. The issue of homosexuality threatens to fracture whole denominations.. as the issue of slavery did a hundred and fifty years ago. We naturally turn to the Bible for guidance, and find ourselves mired in interpretative quicksand. Is the Bible able to speak to our confusion on this issue?

Some passages that have been advanced as pertinent to the issue of homosexuality are, in fact, irrelevant. One is the attempted gang rape in Sodom (Gen. 19:1-29), since that was a case of ostensibly heterosexual males intent on humiliating strangers by treating them "like women," thus demasculinizing them. (This is also the case in a similar account in Judges 19-21.) Their brutal behavior has nothing to do with the problem of whether genuine love expressed between consenting adults of the same sex is legitimate or not. Likewise Deut. 23:17-18 must be pruned from the list, since it most likely refers to a heterosexual prostitute involved in Canaanite fertility rites that have infiltrated Jewish worship; the King James Version inaccurately labeled him a "sodomite."

Several other texts are ambiguous. It is not clear whether 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10 refer to the "passive" and "active" partners in homosexual relationships, or to homosexual and heterosexual male prostitutes. In short, it is unclear whether the issue is homosexuality alone, or promiscuity and "sex-for-hire."

Unequivocal Condemnations

With these texts eliminated, we are left with three references, all of which unequivocally condemn homosexual behavior. Lev. 18:22 states the principle: "You [masculine] shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (NRSV). The second (Lev. 20:13) adds the penalty: "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."

Such an act was regarded as an "abomination" for several reasons. The Hebrew prescientific understanding was that male semen contained the whole of nascent life. With no knowledge of eggs and ovulation, it was assumed that the woman provided only the incubating space. Hence the spilling of semen for any non-procreative purpose--in coitus interruptus (Gen. 38:1-11), male homosexual acts, or male masturbation--was considered tantamount to abortion or murder. (Female homosexual acts were consequently not so seriously regarded, and are not mentioned at all in the Old Testament (but see Rom. 1:26). One can appreciate how a tribe struggling to populate a country in which its people were outnumbered would value procreation highly, but such values are rendered questionable in a world facing uncontrolled overpopulation.

In addition, when a man acted like a woman sexually, male dignity was compromised. It was a degradation, not only in regard to himself, but for every other male. The patriarchalism of Hebrew culture shows its hand in the very formulation of the commandment, since no similar stricture was formulated to forbid homosexual acts between females. And the repugnance felt toward homosexuality was not just that it was deemed unnatural but also that it was considered unJewish, representing yet one more incursion of pagan civilization into Jewish life. On top of that is the more universal repugnance heterosexuals tend to feel for acts and orientations foreign to them. (Left-handedness has evoked something of the same response in many cultures.)

Whatever the rationale for their formulation, however, the texts leave no room for maneuvering. Persons committing homosexual acts are to be executed. This is the clear command of Scripture. The meaning is clear: anyone who wishes to base his or her beliefs on the witness of the Old Testament must be completely consistent and demand the death penalty for everyone who performs homosexual acts. (That may seem extreme, but there actually are some Christians today urging this very thing.) Even though no tribunal is likely to execute homosexuals ever again, a shocking number of gays are murdered by "straights" every year in this country.

Old Testament texts have to be weighed against the New. Consequently, Paul's unambiguous condemnation of homosexual behavior in Rom. 1:26-27 must be the centerpiece of any discussion:

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

No doubt Paul was unaware of the distinction between sexual orientation, over which one has apparently very little choice, and sexual behavior, over which one does. He seems to assume that those whom he condemns are heterosexual, and are acting contrary to nature, "leaving," "giving up," or "exchanging" their regular sexual orientation for that which is foreign to them. Paul knew nothing of the modern psychosexual understanding of homosexuals as persons whose orientation is fixed early in life, or perhaps even genetically in some cases. For such persons, having heterosexual relations would be acting contrary to nature, "leaving," "giving up" or "exchanging" their natural sexual orientation.

Likewise, the relationships Paul describes are heavy with lust; they are not relationships of genuine same-sex love. They are not relationships between consenting adults who are committed to each other as faithfully and with as much integrity as

any heterosexual couple. Again, some people assume that venereal disease and AIDS are divine punishment for homosexual behavior; we know it as a risk involved in promiscuity of every stripe, homosexual and heterosexual. In fact, the vast majority of people with AIDS the world around are heterosexuals. We can scarcely label AIDS a divine punishment, since non-promiscuous lesbians are at almost no risk.

And Paul believes that homosexuality is contrary to nature, whereas we have learned that it is manifested by a wide variety of species, especially (but not solely) under the pressure of overpopulation. It would appear then to be a quite natural mechanism for preserving species. We cannot, of course, decide human ethical conduct solely on the basis of animal behavior or the human sciences, but Paul here is arguing from nature, as he himself says, and new knowledge of what is "natural" is therefore relevant to the case.

Hebrew Sexual Mores

Nevertheless, the Bible quite clearly takes a negative view of homosexual activity, in those few instances where it is mentioned at all. But this conclusion does not solve the problem of how we are to interpret Scripture today. For there are other sexual attitudes, practices and restrictions which are normative in Scripture but which we no longer accept as normative:

1. Old Testament law strictly forbids sexual intercourse during the seven days of the menstrual period (Lev. 18:19; 15:19-24), and anyone in violation was to be "extirpated" or "cut off from their people" (kareth, Lev. 18:29, a term referring to execution by stoning, burning, strangling, or to flogging or expulsion; Lev. 15:24 omits this penalty). Today many people on occasion have intercourse during menstruation and think nothing of it. Should they be "extirpated"? The Bible says they should.

2. The punishment for adultery was death by stoning for both the man and the woman (Deut. 22:22), but here adultery is defined by the marital status of the woman. A married man in the Old Testament who has intercourse with an unmarried woman is not an adulterer--a clear case of the double standard. A man could not commit adultery against his own wife; he could only commit adultery against another man by sexually using the other's wife. And a bride who is found not to be a virgin is to be stoned to death (Deut. 22:13-21), but male virginity at marriage is never even mentioned. It is one of the curiosities of the current debate on sexuality that adultery, which creates far more social havoc, is considered less "sinful" than homosexual activity. Perhaps this is because there are far more adulterers in our churches. Yet no one, to my knowledge, is calling for their stoning, despite the clear command of Scripture. And we ordain adulterers.

3. Nudity, the characteristic of paradise, was regarded in Judaism as reprehensible (2 Sam. 6:20; 10:4; Isa. 20:2-4; 47:3). When one of Noah's sons beheld his father naked, he

was cursed (Gen. 9:20-27). To a great extent this nudity taboo probably even inhibited the sexual intimacy of husbands and wives (this is still true of a surprising number of people reared in the Judeo-Christian tradition). We may not be prepared for nude beaches, but are we prepared to regard nudity in the locker room or at the old swimming hole or in the privacy of one's home as an accursed sin? The Bible does.

4. Polygamy and concubinage were regularly practiced in the Old Testament. Neither is ever condemned by the New Testament (with the questionable exceptions of 1 Tim. 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6). Jesus' teaching about marital union in Mark 10:6-8 is no exception, since he quotes Gen. 2:24 as his authority, and this text was never understood in Israel as excluding polygamy. A man could become "one flesh" with more than one woman, through the act of sexual intercourse. We know from Jewish sources that polygamy continued to be practiced within Judaism for centuries following the New Testament period. So if the Bible allows polygamy and concubinage, why don't we?

5. A form of polygamy was the levirate marriage. When a married man in Israel died childless, his widow was to have intercourse with each of his brothers in turn until she bore him a male heir. Jesus mentions this custom without criticism (Mark 12:18-27 par.). I am not aware of any Christians who still obey this unambiguous commandment of Scripture. Why is this law ignored, and the one against homosexuality preserved?

6. The Old Testament nowhere explicitly prohibits sexual relations between unmarried consenting heterosexual adults, as long as the woman's economic value (bride price) is not compromised, that is to say, as long as she is not a virgin. There are poems in the Song of Songs that eulogize a love affair between two unmarried persons, though commentators have often conspired to cover up the fact with heavy layers of allegorical interpretation. In various parts of the Christian world, quite different attitudes have prevailed about sexual intercourse before marriage. In some Christian communities, proof of fertility (that is, pregnancy) was requisite for marriage. This was especially the case in farming areas where the inability to produce children-workers could mean economic hardship. Today, many single adults, the widowed, and the divorced are reverting to "biblical" practice, while others believe that sexual intercourse belongs only within marriage. Both views are Scriptural. Which is right?

7. The Bible virtually lacks terms for the sexual organs, being content with such euphemisms as "foot" or "thigh" for the genitals, and using other euphemisms to describe coitus, such as "he knew her." Today most of us regard such language as "puritanical" and contrary to a proper regard for the goodness of creation. In short, we do not follow Biblical practice.

8. Semen and menstrual blood rendered all who touched them unclean (Lev. 15:16-24). Intercourse rendered one unclean until sundown; menstruation rendered the woman

unclean for seven days. Today most people would regard semen and menstrual fluid as completely natural and only at times "messy," not "unclean."

9. Social regulations regarding adultery, incest, rape and prostitution are, in the Old Testament, determined largely by considerations of the males' property rights over women. Prostitution was considered quite natural and necessary as a safeguard of the virginity of the unmarried and the property rights of husbands (Gen. 38:12-19; Josh. 2:1-7). A man was not guilty of sin for visiting a prostitute, though the prostitute herself was regarded as a sinner. Paul must appeal to reason in attacking prostitution (1 Cor. 6:12-20); he cannot lump it in the category of adultery (vs. 9). Today we are moving, with great social turbulence and at a high but necessary cost, toward a more equitable, non-patriarchal set of social arrangements in which women are no longer regarded as the chattel of men. We are also trying to move beyond the double standard. Love, fidelity and mutual respect replace property rights. We have, as yet, made very little progress in changing the double standard in regard to prostitution. As we leave behind patriarchal gender relations, what will we do with the patriarchy in the Bible?

10. Jews were supposed to practice endogamy--that is, marriage within the twelve tribes of Israel. Until recently a similar rule prevailed in the American South, in laws against interracial marriage (miscegenation). We have witnessed, within the lifetime of many of us, the nonviolent struggle to nullify state laws against intermarriage and the gradual change in social attitudes toward interracial relationships. Sexual mores can alter quite radically even in a single lifetime.

11. The law of Moses allowed for divorce (Deut. 24:1-4); Jesus categorically forbids it (Mark 10:1-12; Matt. 19:9 softens his severity). Yet many Christians, in clear violation of a command of Jesus, have been divorced. Why, then, do some of these very people consider themselves eligible for baptism, church membership, communion, and ordination, but not homosexuals? What makes the one so much greater a sin than the other, especially considering the fact that Jesus never even mentioned homosexuality but explicitly condemned divorce? Yet we ordain divorcees. Why not homosexuals?

12. The Old Testament regarded celibacy as abnormal, and 1 Tim. 4:1-3 calls compulsory celibacy a heresy. Yet the Catholic Church has made it mandatory for, priests and nuns. Some Christian ethicists demand celibacy of homosexuals, whether they have a vocation for celibacy or not. One argument is that since God made men and women for each other in order to be fruitful and multiply, homosexuals reject God's intent in creation. Those who argue thus must explain why the apostle Paul never married--or, for that matter, why Jesus, who incarnated God in his own person, was single. Certainly heterosexual marriage is normal, else the race would die out. But it is not normative. Otherwise, childless couples, single persons, and priests and nuns would be in violation of God's intention in their creation--as would

Jesus and Paul! In an age of overpopulation, perhaps a gay orientation is especially sound ecologically!

13. In many other ways we have developed different norms from those explicitly laid down by - the Bible: "If men get into a fight with one another, and the wife of one intervenes to rescue her husband from the grip of his opponent by reaching out and seizing his genitals, you shall cut off her hand; show no pity" (Dent. 25:11 f.). We, on the contrary, might very well applaud- her.

14. The Old and New Testaments both regarded slavery as normal and nowhere categorically condemn it. Part of that heritage was the use of female slaves, concubines and captives as sexual toys or breeding machines by their male owners, which Lev. 19:20f., 2 Sam. 5:13 and Num. 31:18 permitted--and as many American slave owners did some 130 years ago, citing these and numerous other Scripture passages as their justification.

The Problem of Authority

These cases are relevant to our attitude toward the authority of Scripture. Clearly we regard certain things, especially in the Old Testament, as no longer binding. Other things we regard as binding, including legislation in the Old Testament that is not mentioned at all in the New. What is our principle of selection here?

For example, modern readers agree with the Bible in rejecting:

Incest
rape
adultery
intercourse with animals.

But we disagree with the Bible on most other sexual mores. The Bible condemned the following behaviors which we generally allow:

intercourse during menstruation
celibacy
endogamy
naming sexual organs
nudity (under certain conditions)
masturbation (Catholicism excepted)
birth control (Catholicism excepted).

And the Bible regarded semen and menstrual blood as unclean, which we do not.

Likewise, the Bible permitted behaviors that we today condemn:

Prostitution
polygamy
levirate marriage
sex with slaves

concubinage
treatment of women as property
very early marriage (for the girl, age 11-13)
And while the Old Testament accepted divorce, Jesus forbade it.

Why then do we appeal to proof texts in Scripture in the case of homosexuality alone, when we feel perfectly free to disagree with Scripture regarding most other sexual issues?

Obviously many of our choices in these matters are arbitrary. Mormon polygamy was outlawed in this country, despite the constitutional protection of freedom of religion, because it violated the sensibilities of the dominant Christian culture. Yet no explicit biblical prohibition against polygamy exists.

The problem of authority is not mitigated by the doctrine that the cultic requirements of the Old Testament were abrogated by the New, and that only the moral commandments of the Old Testament remain in force. For most of these sexual mores fall among the moral commandments. If we insist on placing ourselves under the old law, then, as Paul reminds us, we are obligated to keep every commandment of the law (Gal. 5:3). But if Christ is the end of the law (Rom. 10:4), if we have been discharged from the law to serve, not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit (Rom. 7:6), then all of these biblical sexual mores come under the authority of the Spirit. We cannot then take even what Paul says as a new Law. Fundamentalists themselves reserve the right to pick and choose which laws they will keep, though they seldom admit to doing just that.

Judge for Yourselfs

The crux of the matter, it seems to me, is simply that the Bible has no sexual ethic. There is no Biblical sex ethic. Instead, it exhibits a variety of sexual mores, some of which changed over the thousand year span of biblical history. Mores are unreflective customs accepted by a given community. Many of the practices that the Bible prohibits, we allow, and many that it allows, we prohibit. The Bible knows only a love ethic, which is constantly being brought to bear on whatever sexual mores are dominant in any given country, or culture, or period.

The very notion of a "sex ethic" reflects the materialism and splitness of modern life, in which we increasingly define our identity sexually. Sexuality cannot be separated off from the rest of life. No sex act is "ethical" in and of itself, without reference to the rest of a person's life, the patterns of the culture, the special circumstances faced, and the will of God. What we have are simply sexual mores, which change, sometimes with startling rapidity, creating bewildering dilemmas. Just within one lifetime we have witnessed the shift from the ideal of preserving one's virginity until marriage, to

couples living together for several years before getting married. The response of many Christians is merely to long for the hypocrisies of an earlier era.

Our moral task, rather, is to apply Jesus' love ethic to whatever sexual mores are prevalent in a given culture. We might address younger teens, not with laws and commandments whose violation is a sin, but rather with the sad experiences of so many of our own children who find too much early sexual intimacy overwhelming, and who react by voluntary celibacy and even the refusal to date. We can *offer* reasons, not empty and unenforceable orders. We can challenge both gays and straights to question their behaviors in the light of love and the requirements of fidelity, honesty, responsibility, and genuine concern for the best interests of the other and of society as a whole. Christian morality, after all, is not a iron chastity belt for repressing urges, but a way of expressing the integrity of our relationship with God. It is the attempt to discover a manner of living that is consistent with who God created us to be. For those of same-sex orientation, being moral means rejecting sexual mores that violate their own integrity and that of others, and attempting to discover what it would mean to live by the love ethic of Jesus.

Morton Kelsey goes so far as to argue that homosexual orientation has nothing to do with morality as such, any more than left-handedness. It is simply the way some people's sexuality is configured. Morality enters at the point of how that predisposition is enacted. If we saw it as a God-given gift to those for whom it is normal, we could get beyond the acrimony and brutality that have so often characterized the unchristian behavior of Christians toward gays.

Approached from the point of view of love rather than that of law, the issue is at once transformed, Now the question is not "What is permitted?" but rather "What does it mean to love my homosexual neighbor?" Approached from the point of view of faith rather than works, the question ceases to be "What constitutes a breach of divine law in the sexual realm?" and becomes instead "What constitutes integrity before the God revealed in the cosmic lover, Jesus Christ?" Approached from the point of view of the Spirit rather than the letter, the question ceases to be "What does Scripture command?" and becomes "What is the Word that the Spirit speaks to the churches now, in the light of Scripture, tradition, theology, psychology, genetics, anthropology, and biology?"

In a little-remembered statement, Jesus said, "Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" (Luke 12:57). Such sovereign freedom strikes terror in the hearts of many Christians; they would rather be under law and be told what is right, Yet Paul himself echoes Jesus' sentiment immediately preceding one of his possible references to homosexuality: "Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, matters pertaining to this life!" (1 Cor. 6:3 RSV). The last thing Paul would want is for people to respond to his ethical advice as a new law engraved on tablets of stone. He is himself trying to "judge for himself what is right," If now new evidence is in on the

phenomenon of homosexuality, are we not obligated--no, free--to re-evaluate the whole issue in the light of all the available data and decide, under God, for ourselves? Is this not the radical freedom for obedience in which the gospel establishes us?

It may, of course, be objected that this analysis has drawn our noses so close to texts that the general tenor of the whole Bible is lost, The Bible clearly considers homosexual behavior a sin. and whether it is stated three times or 3,000 is beside the point. Just as some of us grew up "knowing" that homosexual acts were the unutterable sin, though no one ever spoke about it so the whole Bible "knows" it to be wrong.

I freely grant all that, The issue is precisely whether that Biblical judgment is correct. The Bible sanctioned slavery as well, and nowhere attacked it as unjust. Are we prepared to argue that slavery today is biblically justified? One hundred and fifty years ago, when the debate over slavery was raging, the Bible seemed to be clearly on the slave holders' side. Abolitionists were hard pressed to justify their opposition to slavery on biblical grounds, Yet today, if you were to ask Christians in the South whether the Bible sanctions slavery, virtually everyone would agree that it What happened is that the churches were finally driven to penetrate beyond the legal tenor of Scripture to an even deeper tenor, articulated by Israel out of the experience of the Exodus and the prophets and brought to sublime embodiment in Jesus' identification with harlots, tax collectors, the diseased and maimed and outcast and poor. It is that God sides with the powerless. God liberates the oppressed, God suffers with the suffering and groans toward the reconciliation of all things. In the light of that supernal compassion, whatever our position on gays, the gospel's imperative to love, care for, and be identified with their sufferings is unmistakably clear.

In the same way, women are pressing us to acknowledge the sexism and patriarchalism that pervades Scripture and has alienated so many women from the church. The way out, however, is not to deny the sexism in Scripture, but to develop an interpretive theory that judges even Scripture in the light of the revelation in Jesus, What Jesus gives us is a critique of domination in all its forms, a critique that can be turned on the Bible itself. The Bible thus contains the principles of its own correction, We are freed from bibliolatry, the worship of the Bible. It is restored to its proper place as witness to the Word of God, And that word is a Person, not a book.

With the interpretive grid provided by a critique of domination, we are able to filter out the sexism, patriarchalism, violence, and homophobia that are very much a part of the Bible, thus liberating it to reveal to us in fresh ways the inbreaking, in our time, of God's domination-free order.

An Appeal for Tolerance

What most saddens me in this whole raucous debate in the churches is how sub-Christian most of it has been. It is characteristic of our time that the issues most difficult to assess, and which have generated the greatest degree of animosity, are issues on which the Bible can be interpreted as supporting either side. I am referring to abortion and homosexuality.

We need to take a few steps back and be honest with ourselves. I am deeply convinced of the rightness of what I have been sharing with you, But I must acknowledge that it is not an air tight case, You can find weaknesses in it, just as I can in others'. The truth is, we are not given unequivocal guidance in either area, abortion or homosexuality, Rather than tearing at each others' throats, therefore, we should humbly admit our limitations, How do I know I am correctly interpreting God's word for us today? How do you? Wouldn't it be wiser for Christians to lower the decibels by 95 percent and quietly present our cases, knowing full well that we might be wrong?

I know of a couple, both well known Christian authors in their own right, who have both spoken out on the issue of homosexuality. She supports gays, passionately; he opposes their behavior, strenuously. So far as I can tell, this couple still enjoy each other's company, eat at the same table, and, for all I know, sleep in the same bed.

We in the church need to get our priorities straight. We have not reached a consensus about who is right on the issue of homosexuality. But what is clear, utterly clear, is that we are commanded to love one another. Love not just our gay sisters and brothers who are often sitting beside us, unacknowledged, in church, but all of us who are involved in this debate. We don't have to tear whole denominations to shreds in order to air our differences on this point. If that couple I mentioned can continue to embrace across this divide, surely we all can do so.

Options in Authority

The following types of Biblical interpretation display a range of options among Christians who consider the Bible authoritative for faith and life. This range of options is condensed by Dan Johnson from Volume Two of Gabriel Fackre's Systematic Theology, with the permission of the author.

1. **ORACULAR** The words of the original text were dictated directly by God to the author, and are faithfully preserved over time by the action of the Holy Spirit.
2. **INERRANTIST** The writing of the original texts was protected from error by action of the Holy Spirit.
3. **INFALLIBILIST** The Bible conveys perfectly God's will in matters of faith and life. In matters of physics, chemistry, etc., one must consult experts in the sciences, God's Word comes through human limitations, but is not corrupted thereby.
4. **CONCEPTUAL** Looks behind, not in, the medium for the message, The ideas that shine through the Biblical text are the important things; the text is the catalyst for discovering them,
5. **HISTORICAL** Revelation is what God did and does, not what God said. Scripture is a human recital of the acts of God (e.g. exodus, conquest, exile, restoration, incarnation of Christ in Jesus), accompanied by interpretation.
6. **CHRISTOLOGICAL** Scripture is primarily a medium for knowing Jesus Christ, Christ is the active, living Word of God, and the Bible introduces one to Jesus Christ.
7. **SYMBOLIST** Scripture is meaningful rather than objectively truthful, Subjective in its tendency to emphasize what is meaningful "to me", or "to us" as one faith community, it raises human experience as reality's filter to a high level.
8. **COMBINATIONIST** The interweaving of several ways to view the Bible, including some of the above, and some others which tuck subtly in between the above categories or which take into more serious account Church tradition, creeds, the early Church fathers, and ecumenism.

The debate on same sex unions at Acton, Mass.

Here is Dr, Fackre's summary:

"Civil conversation and serious theology-what a contrast to our culture-war polemics!" remarked one outside observer at a United Church of Christ colloquy on same-sex unions, Sponsored by the centrist "Confessing Christ" movement in response to the UCC Conference Ministers' call for church wide dialogue, about 100 New Englanders, mostly clergy, gathered at the Acton, Mass., Congregational Church to hear pro and con presentations with commentary by an ecumenical observer, and for small group discussion,

Lay theologian Andy Lang, a journalist at the UCC Office of Communication, made a case for the church's blessing of gay and lesbian unions, Max Stackhouse, professor of ethics at Princeton Theological seminary and author of *Covenant and Commitment*, took the opposing position, and John Burgess, newly appointed professor of systematic theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, offered an ecumenical critique of both pro and con views.

Andy Lang began the exchange with an exploration of the Reformed teaching on "covenant" as found in the Heidelberg catechism, the Westminster Confession and the theology of Karl Barth. Because sin ("a counter-cultural word") distorts all human relationships-including heterosexual and homosexual relationships-all need to hear God's "Yes" to us in Christ, This Covenantal love for a fallen world is grounded in the triune God whose life together is Covenant, the prototype of our own varied calls to covenantal mutualities and disciplines.

Lang held that "we ... repeat the 'Yes' of Jesus Christ through the covenant of baptism," seeking to live out in all derivative covenants a response to the faithfulness of God and accountability to the community. He viewed heterosexual marriage as "the oldest and best of human covenants," owing, as we do, "our existence to heterosexual parents," and having a tradition which asserts it as an image "of the covenantal love of God for Israel and the church," Yet the marriage vocation is not for everyone, as the long history of celibacy demonstrates--a celibacy also sealed by Covenantal vows and lived in community, and a tradition too quickly renounced by 16th-century Protestantism, Yet the celibate vocation must be chosen in freedom and not declared by fiat, either for clergy in a pre-Reformation church or for those whose homosexuality is a "given" today, (Lang cited a pastoral letter by the U.S. Roman Catholic bishops' Committee on Marriage and the Family describing homosexual orientation "experienced as a given, not something freely chosen.")

So, Lang asked, what is the vocation of gays and lesbians not called into heterosexual

marriage or celibacy? "We are called to Covenantal relationships," he answered, ones that mirror God's own Covenantal being, and thus a move from "isolation into community," While not "marriages" in the sense of heterosexual bonds, these faithful unions are not "second-class" arrangements but "moral relationships [which] have a special claim on the ministry of the church," Gays and lesbians need the same supports of, and accountability to, the community as heterosexual and celibate vocations, They also are "wounded by sin ... and fall from grace," requiring both the mercies and disciplines of the cross. As such, same-sex couples have a claim on pastoral care that includes "the public, liturgical expression of vows that bind them together," With such recognition, gays and lesbians fully join married and celibate in "God's work of sanctification."

Max Stackhouse followed Andy Lang, beginning also with his theological sources, He identified himself as a "liberal Puritan" rooted in the Cambridge Platform and its covenantal theology, modulated by a tradition from the social gospel, the Niebuhrs, Paul Tillich and Martin Luther King, Jr. He contrasted this framework with the appeal to personal experience as the standard in matters of faith and morals, an "American individualism" that he found in statements on homosexuality from the national levels of his own denomination, the United Church of Christ, To these he juxtaposed a covenantal love committed to "fidelity, fecundity and family formation," He viewed these three traditional church norms for sexuality as a model also for the wider society, Stackhouse framed his position by a personal journey, showing the impact on his views of the civil rights struggle, his participation in a council of churches study in response to the application of the gay and lesbian Metropolitan Community Church, his debates on sexuality during his tenure at Andover Newton Theological School and Princeton Theological Seminary, and his cross-cultural studies of sexuality and other ethical issues in Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America.

He espoused the consensus he found in 250 church statements which included the judgment that "genital activity should be confined to a heterosexual marriage . . . and support [should be given] for the civil rights of non-heterosexually-oriented persons, and welcome in church, but not approval of homosexual behavior or same-sex marriage." Stackhouse saw the "Yes" and "No" refrains in these documents as rooted in a doctrine of humanity made in the image of God with derivative rights, together with a "creational/providential covenant" for sexuality that serves as a "dike" against sin. This covenant nourishes life and is a "foretaste of heaven," he said, The freedom of Exodus must be joined to the disciplines of Sinai, Citing the work of Jonathan Mills who asks "[w]hy are liberals and conservatives conspiring to prevent homosexual men' from marrying [women]?", he affirmed Mills' thesis that such marriage is a "little church for healing."

Stackhouse concluded with a challenge to those who claim that what we experience as "natural" is normative, for given the world's fall, we require disciplines, "No civilization has survived without structure/order for family and sexuality."

John Burgess began by alluding to the "polarization and politicization" on the issues of homosexuality in his Presbyterian Church (USA), and warned of diversion from other more central matters and of the romanticizing of both sexuality and marriage, However, he declared, the question cannot be avoided and a quality exploration could well "lead us to the center of the gospel."

Burgess described what he has seen over time as the three main pro and con arguments and cited problems with each, On the pro side: the argument for "faithfulness" based on God's faithfulness does not take into account the need for examining ends, for fidelity can be exercised among thieves and racists; the assumption that natural drives must be satisfied is challenged by research showing the social construction of felt needs and their manipulation by market forces; the appeal for ritualization of same-sex unions raises the question of why for this and not for other covenants.

Problems on the con side: the actual fidelity evidenced • among same-sex couples is nothing like the destructive practices of anti-covenantal sex such as pedophilia and incest, and critics of same-sex unions pay little attention to the non-covenantal act of masturbation; homosexual faithfulness has not proven harmful to the wider society; there is little compelling evidence for altering homosexual orientation,

Burgess argued for a theology of marriage that faces the new world of biology, technology and law which separates procreation from heterosexuality as well as marriage, Such a theology will be rooted in an understanding of God, faithful "like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home." (The Presbyterian Statement of Faith), God, so imaged in male-female terms, "symbolizes the fundamental difference that exists between God and humans, yet the fundamental possibility of relationship that one finds in God's love for humans." Thus, Burgess believes that terms such as "marriage" or "union" are "better suited in the Christian tradition to refer to male and female than to homosexual relationships," That, however, does not preclude "supporting faithfulness in other kinds of relationships, including homosexual relationships. . . ."

In the panel discussion that followed, the ecumenical observer noted four surprising agreements: the common theme of covenantal faithfulness, a recognition of both the "joys and dangers" of sexuality, the need for ordering disciplines, and the special place of heterosexual marriage, He cited the differences between Lang and Stackhouse as disagreement on the status of the "given" of homosexual orientation-- whether or not a "gift," the understanding of right ordering, and the ways of living out the Covenant that God is.

Lang, interpreting his Barthian reading of covenant, pointed out that Barth's own negative view of homosexuality may have been related to his 1930s context of a homosexual movement in Germany that exalted the male and demeaned women, Stackhouse judged Barth's ethics as gospel without sufficient attention to law, while Lang said that law is to be seen through the lens of the cross. Each expressed appreciation to the others for the careful theological work attempted and the civil conversation ventured, The Rev. Dr, Gabriel Fackre is professor emeritus of Christian Theology at Andover Newton Theological School, Newtown Centre, Massachusetts.

SAME SEX UNIONS? NO

The prophetic stand of the ecumenical churches on homosexuality

by Max L. Stackhouse

Note from Dr, Stackhouse: This paper was first given at a conference at Brown University and will appear in a volume soon to be published by Harvard University Press on Religion and Same Sex Marriage, edited by S. Olyan and M, Nussbaum. I did not actually give this paper at the Acton conference in this form; but offered an historical and theological interpretation as to why I came to these convictions and why I think pastors should take them into serious consideration, given the context of UCC and ecumenical debates about the matter, On many points, I thought we three speakers converged-a fact that highlighted certain differences,1)

Over the last quarter century, a debate has raged in the Ecumenical Protestant churches belonging to the National and World Councils of Churches, It is about sexuality, particularly homosexuality. The discussion has been intense. In fact, more church documents, statements, background papers, study books, and proposals have been written on human sexuality in this period than in any comparable period of church history. More than one hundred and fifty of the most important documents from Catholic, Evangelical as well as Ecumenical Protestant sources have been collected in a recent set of volumes, and it is likely that the results can already be discerned, although some advocates argue that debates are just getting started,2

What seems to be clear is both that significant modifications have taken place among the Protestants, and that these modifications have taken place within a reaffirmation of the classic tradition, much in the way that the ancient prophets recalled the covenants of God of old and adapted them to changing situations. It is certainly so that these stances both reflect and will have a substantive influence on the raging cultural and political debates over "family values" generally and homosexuality particularly in the years to come, Disagreements, of course, continue; but the results are rather clear:

1. The churches affirm that genital activity should be confined to a heterosexual marriage, and all intimate relationships should approximate the ideals of that rite,

2. Most churches support the human and civil rights of homosexual persons, but resist giving religious approval to homosexual behavior or same-sex marriage,

3. Most churches (some ambiguously) deny ordination to advocates of or those involved in homosexual practice, which is not viewed as equal to heterosexual marriage,

4. Most have adopted feminist theories of justice in regard to equality of dignity, opportunity, status, and pay, but resist attempts to turn all questions into gender issues.

5. Pastoral care for adults who are single, gay, unable to procreate, or divorced is seen as morally and spiritually required, even if their situations are not approved.

In brief, the overall results of quarter century debate reflect a rejection of a radical effort to overturn the classical position, and they are remarkably consistent. The official statements are quite consistent with the classical traditions, even if each is stamped by its tradition's distinctive concepts. The inclusion of "justice feminism," which is likely to increase, has significantly modified the classical uses of traditional symbolism; but not the basic teachings about the normative character of the heterosexual family.

The debates, however, have been so multifaceted, so laden with cross-cutting arguments and sensibilities, ideologies and conceptions, that the case for these decisions taken as a whole has nowhere been made. Because I largely agree with them, it is the purpose of this paper to set forth an understanding of the logic by which they make sense. This is all the more necessary in view of recent efforts to grant co-equal moral status and economic benefits to same-sexed companionate relationships.³

The Deeper Background of the Controversy

It is an enduring, reasonable, and coherent conviction of those religions born out of the Biblical traditions, that the authors of the Adam and Eve stories of Genesis were inspired to see the human situation with a degree of revealing accuracy. God created humanity and gave to this earthy creature a dignity that was nearly godlike, enabling a communion with God as well as a capacity to exercise freedom and to recognize the laws and purposes of God, thus also to chose against them. This most precious of creatures was also distinguished into male and female, a differentiation that both makes possible an interaction between them that is similar to a relationship with the Creator and makes them potential partners in the processes of creation.

It is also against the distortions of the patterns implied in this story that the prophets protest, They take the breaking of the basic patterns of the moral stage of life as an indicator that the dramatic judgments and renewal of salvation history are necessary, as we see in Ezekiel and Hosea. And it is to this story which Jesus turned (Mark 10: 2-12; Matt. 19:3-6) when the issue of responsible relationship was debated in his day, Something of the right order of life, the good ends of existence, and the engaged

participation in the sustaining contexts of life, and their relation, are implicit in it, It is thick with meaning.

As to the basic normative structure stated in these texts for human sexuality, three elements are primary: First, the fundamental relationship that humans are to have with God and with each other is to be one of fidelity in communion (Gen. 1:27-8), One is not to live only by or for oneself. Persons, in the Biblical tradition, are to be respected and honored, Each is made "in the image of God." (Gen. 1:26) Here is the deepest root of what became, later, spoken of as the "soul," the seat of human "dignity," the source of "conscience," and thus the center of all rights and duties and the core of that freedom and knowledge that allows personal responsibility.

And yet, individualism is not the chief implication of this insight, Persons are not only rooted in a relationship to God, but is intended for human relationship. "It is not good that one should be alone." (Gen. 2:18) The question is whether there is a normative character to the relationship. We are given the freedom and power to name the realities they discover under God's care and to till the garden and to keep it, but we are not to decide matters opportunistically, to use the creation only to satisfy felt needs, or to deny the integrity of the primal relationship which brought all that is into being, (Gen. 2:15-17) It is right to be faithful; it is wrong to violate limits: "of this tree you shall not eat". Personal and relational existence, morally and spiritually considered, is rooted in a God-given right order of things that, in some measure, everyone knows.

Moreover, we are to use the resources of creation-the world, the mind, and the body- to see that life flourishes, The command "be fruitful and multiply" is one of the earliest and most repeated of the commands, That which defies or stultifies life is contrary to that purpose. The capacity to reproduce is a gift; generativity is a mark of how God invites creatures to participate in the blessing of ongoing creativity, This means, among other things, that humans are to see their sex as a part of the ongoing flow of life, as a blessed link in the generations, becoming fathers and mothers to the generations of tomorrow in a way that can be honored, and then honoring the fathers and the mothers who went before.

To be sure, the mere proliferation of progeny is not the sufficient mark of vision of or responsibility to the future. The serving of God and fellow humanity may call some to stand beyond the ordinary functions of life, as saints and sages in many traditions testify, Further, the formation of affectional bonds that knit together lives in mutual affirmation may itself be generative of social relationships that are to be even more honored than mere parenting, as we see in the life of Jesus. This motif is present throughout the Bible, not only in stories such as those of Abraham and Sarah, or of Jacob and Leah, but also of David and Jonathan and of Ruth and Naomi, and among the first disciples of Jesus, (Mk. 10: 28-30), It may even be that greater moral integrity

will be recognized by God in some same-sexed affections than is found in many opposite-sexed relationships, Thus, we dare not prematurely attempt to separate the "wheat from the tares" in this life, Nevertheless, these affections are not something that can and should displace the common expectation that we should seek to approximate the primary structures and purposes of human sexuality given in creation.

Not only are fidelity within a framework of created order, and fruitful generativity within a framework of honorable affectional relationships part of the moral fabric established in the deepest structures of human life, humans are called by the Biblical tradition to form and sustain social institutions where both fidelity and fruitful generativity become part of the common life. When a man and a woman in their differentiation and their complementarity see each other as truly other, yet the same as the self ("..flesh of my flesh", Gen. 2:20-23), they are no longer bound only to previous kin relationships. They are invited to form new intimate bonds without guilt: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh, And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." (Gen. 2:24-5)⁴

Thus, to fidelity and fecundity is added family, a social and institutional matter that always takes place amidst the various structures of society that give it a specific stamp. Real families, of course, almost never are formed within an idyllic setting of plentiful goodness, although falling in love echoes that primal sensibility, Real families are almost always found in situations of temptation and distortion, Love inevitably takes place in the context of social history where betrayal, scarcity, and pain are well known. At times the family shape has been patriarchal, sometimes matriarchal, always at least a little tribal or clannish, historically often feudal or manorial, recently bourgeois or suburban, and increasingly "dual-career". Each pattern suggests that the actual shape of family life and thus the operating definitions of fidelity and of fecundity are worked out in the context of a civil society at large, Therefore, even if the demand to embody "one flesh" remains, precisely how it is to be related to a fidelity to the right order of things, or to generative fecundity, becomes also partly an issue of the whole fabric of society, The conflicts over these are already known in the hostilities of Cain and Abel, and in the establishment of the arts and crafts by which the larger structures of civilization are created and sustained. (Gen. 4) Yet, while the existential integration of these three aspects of morality is ever fraught with conflict, the primal Biblical witness tells us that from the beginning life entails both a dignity of each person and, in regard to the secondary issue of sexuality, a calling to live in a normed relationship under God-a heterosexual and monogamous one marked by fidelity, fecundity, and family as a critical structure in the fabric of civilization, This that has been seen as valid within and beyond the tradition wherever it has been encountered and all who approximate these patterns, from whatever culture or religion, are recognized as married. All other

options are seen as adjustments, exceptions, compromises, or relative approximations.

Although parts of the tradition would accent aspects of this heritage with different emphases, this is the triadic standard by which sexuality is classically perceived, Sometimes in history one or another of these three aspects of a full moral vision has been under attack and has to be defended by prophetic outcries; but all are necessary to the whole. It would be an error, one which parts of the tradition have made from time to time, to take one or another of these and to make it the whole in the assessment of human sexuality, Thus, a view that accents only the right order of things can become legalistic; one that accents only fecundity can ignore affection; and one that accents only "traditional family values" can fail to see the changing place of family-life in the fabric of social history, The parts belong to a basic pattern that repeatedly has to be reaffirmed by being reformed in a changing context.⁵

It must be emphasized that this pattern stands within a larger vision, one that suggests that marriage is not in itself an ultimate matter. God, in this tradition, has no consort and is neither sexed or gendered, even if human images of or language about God is, Further, Jesus instructed us that "there is no giving or taking in marriage in heaven," and the ultimate vision of the New Jerusalem has no mention of marriage,⁶ When we speak of sexuality and the moral forms it is to take, therefore, we are speaking within the confines of history, not of the most ultimate aspects of redemption. That is a matter that must be left to God.

Still, historical matters are not to be decided by historical experience alone, It would also be an error, in this view, to begin with an understanding of this or that person's sexual inclinations or desires, and then to construct a moral vision or a spirituality that would support whatever is the case. That would subordinate a normative ethical vision to individual feelings and, denies that historical experience itself is experienced as being under norms that history neither contains nor exhausts, For one thing, the image of God that gives each person moral integrity is no more sexed or gendered than is God and persons can claim rights or know duties that history denies. For another, the prophetic tradition appears in the Biblical heritage when Nathan called even the priest-king David to account for violating these norms to meet his own desires, (2' Sam. 11 & 12) So also, when the priests of Baal tried to install a fertility cult in the land, Elijah was raised up to stop it, (I Kings 18 & 19). Christians share this prophetic tradition (Mk, 10: 11-2; Mt. 19: 9-12) and later used it also to restrain excesses on the other side of the sexual spectrum. Against certain Gnostic, Montanist, and Cathar movements, which held that male and female were interchangeable or that spirituality opposed materiality so that to procreate was to enslave souls in matter, Christian theology called marriage a "holy estate."

Christians generally believe that this prophetic tradition was most fully revealed in a messiah whom it anticipated, In this presence of God in human flesh, the love of God is made concrete, Jesus Christ reveals in life, more than any other historical event, the integrating order, purpose, and context of life, and thus this love is to be appropriately manifest in each area of life.⁷ This is what gives the basic patterns of life, more or less obvious to all, their inner conviction and personal coherence for Christians, Love, like the possibilities given in creation, has in it both freedom and order that take on both existential intensity and transcendental significance, Without freedom it is only instinct; without order, it is mere emotion. Authentic love integrates these and links them to both faith and hope. Without fidelity, it loses logic; without hope, it loses purpose, To be sure, distinctive expressions of freedom and structure are proper to different relationships in life. Honoring the right order of things as a sign of faith and enacting generative fertility as a sign of hope, both proper to the formation of family life, can be organized within this general normative framework in a number of ways. Indeed, it is not unlike every other area of life that is to be lived as a context in which the grace of God's love can be made manifest. There is no single blueprint for politics, economics, culture, law, education, any more than there is for sexuality, But that some patterns lack or threaten or deny or exclude these qualities must be acknowledged.

In fact, most Christians believe that everyone knows something of these normative standards and qualities, for what is revealed in scripture and in Christ accords with how God formed all humans at their deepest levels. These religious themes are not something imposed on people, or distinctive to one religious group, but are revealing of how life is really constituted, That is why many believe that all morally honest people know that something is wrong with relationships that are driven only by instinct or emotion or that do not sustain fidelity or hope, And that is why people feel violated by the infidelity of those they love, lament the prospect of infertility, resent social policies that weaken families, and turn to extreme ideological or life-style strategies to overcome these difficulties.

For this reason, the Christian tradition has held that it is proper for the church to guide the formation of public thought and the institutions in which sexuality is most directly expressed especially the family, but also education, law, and economics as they influence or inhibit the formation of the social channels in which sexuality can find expression, The earliest Christians began to advise believers on how to live their sexual lives as we can see in both the Pauline and Pastoral letters and early books of moral instruction, Further, whenever Christians had a chance to shape the civilization, they formed patterns for the expression of sexuality that sustain fidelity, fecundity, and family, infused with love, and developed critical stances toward attitudes and policies that distorted these, even when these distortions came from sources within the faith,⁸

Distinctive Protestant Perspectives

The Biblical view represents the deepest context within which current approaches to sexuality are debated in Christian circles; but we must note also a secondary context and turn, later, to a tertiary context, the current gay-advocacy suspicions of the biblical and the theological traditions. It may be that Protestant views are especially problematic in this regard, for Protestants are often suspicious of natural law arguments.

In most Protestant views the focus is more on creation and grace than on nature and law, a distinction that manifests itself in, for example, the moral priority of fidelity in relationship over the role of fertility in procreation. Often, in fact, Protestants are doubtful of the view that grace simply completes or perfects nature. Grace is held to be constitutive of creation in most Protestant views and they often hold that what we call "nature" is "fallen"-the purposes intended by God are contorted, garbled, or made ambiguous in the actual operation of things, What we examine when we study what is "natural" is what is distorted, incomplete, or contingent, even if it bears traces of God's grace in the capacity to be reformed toward order, purpose, and reliable relationship,⁹ Thus, in most Protestant traditions, humans may, or even have a duty to alter "natural" patterns of life to limit its defects, and to use technology to alter what is out of accord with God's intent so that it may more nearly approximate grace-full principles, purposes, and relationships, This tradition, for example, has come to advocate (sometimes slowly, but actually in concert with these accents) social reform, a right to divorce or abortion under certain conditions, the equality of women (including in church offices), technological innovation, and birth control as moral obligations.

Further, Ecumenical Protestantism feels a compelling responsibility both to interpret and to shape the common life on theological grounds. This perspective tends to reject the view that theology and theologically-grounded ethics are private matters, pertinent only to believing selves or particular religious groups, and to insist that it is a decisive mode of public discourse, pertinent to all members of society and necessary to the framing of policies that govern all. Those who wish to relegate theology to the margins of political debate and reduce the moral influence of religion on the common life on the grounds that we live in a morally and religiously pluralistic society, or that only secular rationality ought to be the basis of public policy, will find their most persistent opponents less among those who want the state to accept their particular dogma, than among those who hold that "ecumenical" theology rooted in grace is more rational and universal than secular or sectarian positions.

The contemporary debates in the ecumenical churches about homosexuality are, thus, neither new nor only about the inner life of churches. They echo of convictions that touch the nerves of the civilization's heritage, It is unlikely that we can grasp the profound bases of reservation about homosexuality in our society if we do not

understand that it is rooted in a fundamental theological conception about the nature of human identity under God and of how human life therefore ought to be lived in society. On the whole, this public theological tradition has held that what is found in symbolic and mythic form in the Genesis stories and reinforced by Christ is, in fact, the most public and universal truth that humanity knows about the basic normative structure for sexuality. It is how God wants us to live.

These deeper convictions have been challenged in recent years, and that has caused much controversy that bears on this issue. It may well be that we can identify some of the deeper issues in the debates by pointing to certain developments in our history that demanded a re-reading of scripture and a reconstruction of our theological ethics in view of various challenges. Each one is a marker of a larger transition from earlier practices and perspectives to present debates.

One involves the conviction by Martin Luther that the Roman Church had misinterpreted the scriptures by presuming a sharp contrast between spiritual and material reality, and thus falsely given a privileged status both to celibacy and the capacity of the priesthood to confer grace through sacramental performance.¹⁰ It was an order of creation graciously given by God to sustain life and constrain lustful tendencies in society, but it was not the actions of the church that conferred the grace, even if marriage continued to be celebrated in and registered with the church as a part of the church's proper, public role. Implicit in this challenge is a repudiation of the synthesis of "lower" nature and "higher" grace that had been worked out in medieval theology. Grace and nature are woven together in a more subtle mix.

The other was the recovery of the Biblical theme of covenant, especially by the Calvinistic wing of the Reformation. The covenant was the forming of a new institution under God that would allow the orders of creation to sustain and bless life, even when they are distorted by sin. All people are to form covenants of commitment that give shape to life in ways that approximate, under conditions of sin, the patterns and purposes of holy living that God intends.¹¹ This is true in regard to power and politics, in regard to culture and learning, and in regard to wealth and economics. States, universities, and corporations are potential centers of covenantal responsibility. It is even more true in regard to sexuality and family life, for these are the most widespread and most directly personal of covenantal spheres. Marriage, understood as covenant rather than as sacrament or as contract¹², is the primary theological-social relationship by which the defects of the fall, known in broken nature and manifest in lustful desires, find their evils constrained and their residual graces, effaced but not obliterated by the fall, enabled to approximate holy living. Each of these areas or "orders" of life (e.g., religion, politics, economics, culture, law, education, and family) are distinct; but properly structured by a theologically grounded covenantal ethic, they strengthen both the whole fabric of civil society and the soul of each person. This covenant was to take place in accord with the laws and purposes of God, as discerned and made manifest in the mutual pledges of "truth"-enduring faithfulness

under God-between a man and a woman, as confirmed by the community of witnesses to be in accord with the first principles of righteousness and the well-being of society. The wedding,, thus, is a public declaration before God and the people, and society's public honoring of, a valid covenant of marriage, which will actually have been made privately in pledges of love.

Puritan contributions; Puritan conflicts

There were many variations on these themes in the several Protestant traditions, but the adoption of the covenantal model in the rites of marriage that soon followed stands as a symbol of a shift from sacrament to covenant as the primary, way of understanding not only human sexuality, but the social and ethical context in which sexuality was to be understood in much of modern theology and society.

Because of frequent confusions, we must note the difference between the views of the Puritans, who first mediated this covenantal view to the Anglo-American world, and the Victorians, who reasserted an older tradition that spirituality and materiality, grace and nature were contraries, and thus that the more religious or moral one was, the less concerned with the physical side of life one would be, This view not only fed moralistic protests against the rising influence of the biological sciences and of economics, but issued in a prudery in regard to human sexuality, to which the term "puritan" is sometimes applied.

However, like most Protestant traditions, this heritage did not think that sex was evil or bad, an indicator of inferiority, or a brutish necessity that had to be endured. While undoubtedly laden with residues of patriarchy, the Protestants thought God created not only sex, but marriage, before the Fall for our companionship, increase, and well-being, even if, after the Fall, sex was sufficiently distorted that the covenant became all the more necessary as a decisive way of limiting sin and of providing a means whereby we could, by the grace of God, sense the joys of heaven, ¹³ At the same time, it must be admitted that in many Protestant sermons and households, this larger tradition became temporarily wedded to Victorian presumptions (as later generations were to Romanticism, Existentialism, or Freudianism), and the notion was lost that the ecstasies of sex both echo the bliss of creation and anticipate the joys of the kingdom yet to come, even if they are not redemptive per se, ¹⁴

Sex in marriage, thus, was designed not only to regenerate the species, thereby connecting us ethically, biologically, and socially to the nurture of the future, it was also to regenerate the spirit; remind us of the divine life, and empower the spirit to rightly order life so that the paired complementarity of God's design of humankind could be concretely manifest in ways that would also overcome the terrors of loneliness and ego-centrism to which humans are prone, Sinful humans would be drawn into structured bonds of interdependence that link the interpersonal unit of the family to the institutional composition of civil society, and tie the affections of the soul to Godly living. Fidelity to and in this covenantal relationship was an emblem of our fidelity to God's covenantal design for life as it was to be actualized in all areas, even if it sometimes led to the sufferings of the cross. The attention

given to familial covenants thus becomes a manifestation of *a* very high estimate of sexuality, not of its low estate. In this context, humans had a "duty to desire." 15

This tradition never advocated celibacy (or, disengagement from politics or vows of poverty as marks of faith). Nor did it speak of the "rights of privacy" as an individual right although it often sought the independence of the church, of the press, of the school, and of business, as well as the home, from too much state intervention. Covenanted "societies" had a sacred inviolability and were the primary units in which persons worked out their gifts and callings. 16 It cannot be said that all moral difficulties were overcome by these developments or that those who lived according to this view were fully righteous, any more than it can be said that every Hebrew after Sinai refrained from idolatry, adultery, and covetousness, or every Catholic after receiving the sacraments a lived holy, pure, and sanctified life in accord with the highest possibilities of human nature. But these developments can be said to offer a prophetic interpretation of the previous biblical and theological traditions that is both faithful to their deepest structures of reason and revelation, and conducive to modern, complex civilizations in a way that brings greater possibilities of free will guided by and toward just order.

Decisive in this development for our questions was the growing sense of distinction between sin and crime. In accord with the larger heritage, the Protestant churches argued, compellingly, that not everything that has been treated as sinful (such as some abortions) should be criminalized and not all that is criminal (such as some civil disobedience) should be treated as sinful. Indeed, each of them could be, like just revolutions, the least evil option which one may be called upon to undertake with an humble courage, while holding with confidence to the promise of forgiveness offered to those who seek to discern how God wants *us* to live in this world. We should be tolerant, especially legally, but we should not engage in or approve behavior that increases the likelihood of abortion or war, even if some people genuinely feel desires that could lead to those results. Similarly with homosexuality.

The distinction of sin and crime augmented the tendency to see marriage as a voluntary act, not a sacramental one, and thus aided the growth of contractual views of marriage *in* the culture. Yet these distinctions did not exempt sexual feelings and behaviors from moral and theological guidance; indeed, all human life in these areas is subject to theological discernment, ethical evaluation and social judgment, and the standard remains the enduring, faithful, equitable, monogamous, heterosexual, covenantal model. Preferably, they are also to be fecund, but should use proper means of birth control, which the state must allow, to make sure that children are wanted, well-spaced, and cared for.

Those who live in other kinds of relationships--separated, divorced, unfaithful, abusive, homosexual--may well be accepted as members of churches and recognized as persons under God's care; but their *inclinations* and their behaviors, whether intended or not, are among those that are not affirmed as ideal. It is indeed likely that, in this view, few or even no marriages fulfill all aspects of the kind of covenant such as God established with Israel or Christ with the church, and thus every human approximation to the marriage covenant has elements that are deficient or problematic. That is what most ecumenical Protestants affirm when they were alert to the tradition's deepest roots, and that is why the Old and New Testaments, which witness to these covenants, are deemed revelation and are taken as the standards for our relative covenants. That is also the basis for the Protestant view that "all are sinners in need of the grace of God". Sin, in this view, is less the intentional betrayal of some principle or norm than a basic condition that makes saving grace necessary whatever our intentions, and even in spite of our best intentions. In addition to this "state of sin" which we call "original," there are of course particular "sins", specific acts that we do, duties we neglect, attitudes that we take, feelings that we savor, egoisms that we indulge, either wilfully or without moral or spiritual protest, that are contrary to what we know to be right and good and fitting. Even more distorting are the rationalized forms of denial of our sin or of justifications for our sins, which compound the fault. The resistance to the ordination of gay clergy is, at its deepest levels, rooted as much in this issue as it is in certain behaviors. Protestant pastors are not inclined to argue that separated, divorced, unfaithful, or abusive relationships are fully compatible with the ideal, and in most of theological history homosexual pastors did not claim that their situation was normative either. It is suspected that under contemporary ideological confusions, they are likely to distort the normative message, thereby morally and spiritually legitimating sin or sins with the authority of their office.

Temptations to rationalize a particular bias attend us all, not only gay clergy. Yet, in spite of the general condition of sin and our particular list of sins of omission or commission, Ecumenical Protestants hold that we can make some relative discernment as to the marks of a properly covenantal relation, just as we can, with a relative degree of confidence, tell the difference between better or worse political regimes, better or worse corporate behaviors, and better or worse academic institutions. And in this area, Ecumenical protestants throughout their history and still today are doubtful whether homosexual relationships are or can be as nearly approximate to the ideal as heterosexual ones. Congregations thus are suspicious of non-married clergy, even if the distinction between sin and crime and their own awareness of their own defects leads Protestants to believe that "it takes all kinds to make a world", and that Christians ought to "live and let live" in terms of legal policy. ¹⁷ In accord with this emphasis, a number of the ecumenical churches have increasingly advocated the decriminalization of homosexuality, even if they have not moved toward approving it. ¹⁸

More recent Protestant disputes

Among the intriguing issues surrounding the debates about these teachings is the fact that those who oppose this general consensus frequently link their objections to economic interpretations of the origins and function of classical moral concepts and thereby undercut, perhaps unintentionally the theological tradition. This can easily be seen in a recent article written by Walter C. Righter. As the Episcopal bishop accused of heresy for ordaining a priest who has been living with a United Church of Christ clergyman, he puzzles about the possible reasons for such charges, now that they have been dropped. He notes that some studies show a link between homophobia and misogyny and he speaks of pent up anxiety about change in moral standards to which many are "accustomed." Such irrational motivations are presumed to be behind the opposition to his actions, not theology or morality. When he does speak of these, he says that the Ten Commandments "long thought to be a moral code for all ages," are now held to be "a property code" designed "to preserve property rights that no longer exist." Indeed, the entire debate about the family, he claims, is primarily about a "fault line between the past and the future" in regard to property and society, and "we are privileged with the necessity of forming a new social contract." He ends with a text from "Star Trek": "Boldly go where no person has gone before." 19

Although many find the whole idea of heresy quaint, even offensive, it is doubtful that the perspectives offered by the bishop will be persuasive to believers, even if most agree that misogyny, homophobia, reactive anxiety about change, and the applications of property issues to persons are frightful. The view he advocates undercuts the very prospect of a normative theology and an enduring morality able to assess and guide changing experience in changing societies. However, his perspective has wide currency in parts of academia and many advocacy movements in the Ecumenical churches, many of which already practice some form of pastoral blessing of same-sex marriage.

Nevertheless, as we can see in recent decisions by the United Methodist, Reformed, Presbyterian, and Lutheran churches, all of which repudiate such views in favor of the classical, covenantal tradition, Protestant Christians are unlikely to adopt such views—even if they do not want to condemn individuals and seeking to reconstruct the wisdom and insight present in Scripture and the Reformation. They are more likely to hold fast to the prophetic tradition that was willing to judge distortions of God's covenantal laws and purposes. In this, they recognize the indispensable place of theology and ethics in social analysis, both to understand why people do what they do, and to offer guidance as to how we ought to live. Because religions vary and religious conflicts are sometimes the most intense, many seek non-religious concepts to interpret social realities. Some things about humans are, in fact, rather constant: most people want and need companionship, and basically like sex, peace, and plenty. They avoid loneliness, conflict, and sexual and economic poverty. But sexual activity, material plenty, and both personal companionship and social solidarity tend to be

more reliably present when a stable way of linking them is found, and the only durable way of linking them has been the family. But the family, it turns out, is rather fragile on its own under conditions of a sinful and broken world. It requires an embodied sense of sacredness to stabilize it, and that sacredness must be graced by a divine righteousness and purpose.

"Religion," in other words, and both the critical reflection on it and its ethical implications for all the aspects of society they influence by means of theology, are the distinctive human activities that distinguish humanity from other creatures of the earth. It will not do to see all human motivations in terms of psychodynamic impulses or economic interests. Our most profound, determinative nature is not "natural" in the biophysical sense, but spiritual and moral. Insofar as these structure the social realities of life, they cannot be ignored in the analysis of the fabric of society. In fact, the kind and quality of religion turns out to be critical for the kind of social, ethical, and material systems developed in civilizations—the roles, relationships, institutions, rules, and expectations that guide us. And it is doubtful that the ethical norms for that religion can be gathered from science fiction.

For such reasons, one wide stream of the theological heritage is essentially reasserting continuity with the wisdom of previous ages and adapting it to today: sexuality, the formation of households and homes, the nurture of children and the development of ways to aid those in need, ought to take place in the covenanted relationships of a differentiated civil society which recognizes the reality of the basic orders of creation or spheres of life, and that we can know, with some degree of reliability, what some marks of such relationships are. Thus, some in the churches are seeking a deeper analysis of the concept of covenant as a moral theory for familial life in civil society. In view of all the issues of sex and marriage, household and work, home and religion, corporations and schools, welfare and society, this question continues to haunt the churches' efforts: can we construct a viable ethic for family life in a globalizing civil society, given the changing intellectual, economic, and psycho-social transformations at hand.

On the whole, the Ecumenical Protestants do not oppose these transformations. In fact, many of them may well be rooted in attitudes and institutions that the Reformation and its implications engendered. Most Protestants do not want to be forced into becoming sectarians, hostile to culture, unable to perform marriages as a civil act, opposed to justice for women or minorities, or angry about the secular or pagan character of everything around them. Instead, they do want to live in, participate in, have a voice in, and shape things toward a more just and loving society. They simply do not believe that the present movement to make gay coupling equal to heterosexual marriage is likely to do that, or how God wants people to live.

On the whole, also, the answer is a prophetic one: love, indeed, just love is best grasped when linked to a basic appreciation for the way God created humanity for

fidelity, fecundity and family, a-recognition that much is fallen, and neglected dimensions of our theological heritage of covenantal understanding may be still laden with valid, pluralistic, and dynamic possibilities more faithful and more graceful, and (thank God) more adequate to the deep and enduring needs of humanity than the alternatives. The alternatives are, to put it most sharply, false prophecy.

In one way, the unintended result of the churches' explorations stands as a challenge to the churches and clergy as well as to society in general. It is not clear that contemporary religious leaders realize what an impact, and thus both an opportunity and a responsibility, they have in influencing souls and societies. Decisive, I believe, is a "prophetic" recovery and recasting of the covenantal tradition, linked to a fresh vision of how the family may find its place in a civil society where dual careers, a corporate economy, and a limited state in a global society are our likely future.

Notes

1. Some portions of the following materials will also appear in my *Covenant and Commitments*, (Westminster/John Knox, forthcoming, 1997).
2. See J. Gordon Melton, *The Churches Speak on Sex and Family Life* (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1991); and *The Churches Speak on Homosexuality* (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1991). Cf. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Church Documents on Human Sexuality and the Authority of Scripture," *Interpretation*, XLIX/1 (Jan., 1995), pp. 46-58.
3. Many of my views on these matters are more fully stated in my *Covenant and Commitments* (Louisville: W/JK, forthcoming), espec. Chapter 1, from which some parts of the following are drawn.
4. So far as I have been able to discover, every creation myth has a division of male and female linked with an ethic of order and fertility, but this is often among the gods. Humans stay home and honor their activities. The Biblical story is distinctive in that it locates sexuality in creation and calls for humans to leave home and to create new institutions. Historically, a major debate about this new community has been in regard to the priority of fidelity to the right order of things or of fecundity, or, as Thomas wrote, of *fides* and *proles*, but some have argued that this third factor is central to the biblical record, and decisive for the formation of the nuclear family. See Otto A. Piper, *The Christian Interpretation of Sex* (New York: Harper, 1941).
5. Particular judgments or policies ought, I believe, include a synthesis of the three basic modes of discourse, often called deontology, teleology and ethology (or sometimes contextual). See my "The Trinity as Public Theology," in *Faith to Creed*, ed. M. Heim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 162-97.

6. However, the City which welcomes all peoples and is planted for their healing is "adorned as a bride." (Rev. 21:2)
7. See, among the many treatises on this, Diogenes Allen, *Love: Christian Romance, Marriage, and Friendship* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1987).
8. See John T. Noonan, *Contraception* (Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1965), which is as yet unsurpassed as a general study of the institutions guiding marriage in the early church, as well as of contraception specifically. Important information is also present in Kenneth Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing: A Study of Christian Marriage Rites* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1983).
9. This view is not held by all Protestants equally. Some quite "conservative" views hold that a great deal can be known about God's creational intent by studying nature, and some quite "liberal" Protestants have almost identified "creation" with "nature" as understood in the Enlightenment or even in Romanticism, and thus take whatever is found in "nature" as what God intended. We shall see later that some confusion in Protestant thought about nature, specifically in regard to homosexuality but also in regard to ecology and technology is a source of contemporary debate.
10. The best treatment of this reorientation can be found in John Witte, Jr., "The Transformation of Marriage Law in the Lutheran Reformation," *The Weightier Matters of the Law: Essays on Law and Religion*. Ed., John Witte, Jr. and Frank S. Alexander. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988. Pp. 57-97.
11. A very helpful treatment of these themes is Joseph L. Allen, *Love and Conflict: A Covenantal Model of Christian Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984).
12. As mentioned above (n. 13), the term *compactum* signals a voluntary agreement, but it also included the notion that the terms of the agreement were pre-given, and can be morally or legally voided if these terms are not met. See John Witte, "From Sacrament to Contract: The Legal Transformations of the Western Family" *Criterion* (University of Chicago Divinity School) forthcoming. Later a distinction between "covenant" and "contract" begins to suggest that "social contracts" are wholly constructed by human will, and voluntary, mutual actions between adults are exempt from theological-ethical evaluation. Similar ideas can be found in Rousseau, but became influential in ecumenical circles in regard to sexuality at the hands of the Quakers. See *Towards a Quaker View of Sex* (London and Philadelphia: Friends Home Service Committee, 1963). Cf. P. Ramsey, "On Taking Sexual Responsibility Seriously Enough, Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics" (New York: Scribners, 1967).
13. See, especially, the superb study by Edmund Leites, *The Puritan Conscience and Modern Sexuality* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1986). It is fascinating that such an emphasis should be made in regard to sexuality in marriage simultaneously with the

relative reduction of accent on the sacraments in worship. It is quite likely that this development parallels what Max Weber proposed with regard to economics, namely, the movement of the ascetic ethic from the monastery to the world of work. So, in this area, the "foretaste" of heaven is found as much in the disciplined ecstasies of the marriage bed as in the transubstantiated elements at the altar.

14. It is in protest against this loss and the Victorian denial of the religious significance of sensuality, so far as I can see, that prompts some today to press in the opposite direction, although some do so in the extreme. See, e.g., *Sexuality and the Sacred*, ed. James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994).

15. E. Leites, "The Duty to Desire: Love Friendship, and Sexuality in Some Puritan Theories of Marriage," *Comparative Civilization Review*, No. 3 (Fall, 1979), pp. 40-82. See also Mary S. Van Leeuwen, et al., *After Eden* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) for what may be the best feminist treatment of many of these themes.

16. See E. S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, rev. ed., (New York: Harper, 1966); and the striking new study by Stephen Innes, *Creating the Commonwealth: The Economic Culture of Puritan New England* (New York: Norton, 1995).

17. Very few studies of this matter seem to exist; but these accents can be seen in the attitudes of the most "liberal" heirs of the Puritans when they met to discuss these matters and were surveyed by Yoshio Fukuyama. See "The Views of General Synod Delegates on Human Sexuality," (New York: UCBHM, 1977).

18. See J. Gordon Melton, *The Churches Speak on Homosexuality* (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1991).

19. "Behind the Charge of Heresy," *Boston Globe* (August 4, 1996), pp. D-1,3.

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SAME SEX UNIONS? YES.

The order of Christian covenant in marriage, celibacy, and same-sex unions

by Andrew G. Lang

A FEW YEARS AGO the Ramsey Colloquium—a group of Christian and Jewish scholars published a sharp critique of "the gay and lesbian cause" which they titled "The Homosexual Movement." ¹ As they predicted, their declaration was denounced as "a display of homophobia." "Such dismissals have become unpersuasive and have ceased to intimidate," they wrote. "Indeed, we do not think it a bad thing that people should experience a reflexive recoil from what is wrong." This "reflexive recoil" from homosexual behavior is not homophobia, they said, but the instinctive reflex of those who know that homosexuality violates God's natural law.

Among the authors were several academics at liberal centers like Amherst, Princeton, Oberlin, Yale and Hebrew Union College. It hardly needs to be said that entering the debate in this way exposed the Ramsey Colloquium to angry denunciation and was, for some of its members, an act of courage.

My purpose is not to criticize the declaration's reasoning but to draw your attention to one paragraph as the starting point for our conversation:

We believe that any understanding of sexuality, including heterosexuality, that makes it chiefly an arena for the satisfaction of personal desire is harmful to individuals and society. Any way of life that accepts or encourages sexual relations for pleasure or personal satisfaction alone turns away from the disciplined community that marriage is intended to engender and foster. [Italics added.]

This is a profoundly counter-cultural vision of human sexuality and one that can be helpful as we struggle with the moral question that is before us: should the church affirm faithful relationships between same-sex partners?

The Ramsey Colloquium, rightly in my opinion, calls into question the ethic of "sexual liberation." Thirty years after the Sexual Revolution, our culture still understands sexual freedom as freedom from constraint, namely, from the boundaries of discipline, order and structure. And who could be opposed to freedom? We always live in the tension between personal freedom and social discipline, so we want to liberate ourselves from this tension and live in the light of a pure freedom that never says "no" to human possibility. Defined in this way, freedom is the doctrine of personal sovereignty, the private property of the ego that has to be seized and defended. So

words like "discipline," "order" and "structure" also provoke a "reflexive recoil"-the recoil of the individual ego when we encounter boundaries that limit our freedom of action. Naturally, in a culture that defines individuality as self-determination and self-assertion, discipline is at best suspicious, at worst offensive.

But this is not the church's traditional vision of freedom or individuality. Freedom, according to all Christian traditions, is not freedom from but freedom for. Karl Barth saw it as "freedom for obedience" to the Word of God. Particularly in the witness of the Reformed churches, freedom cannot be understood as my self-liberation but only as the sovereign gift of God who, despite my opposition, rushes to my side and creates the right order that I have abandoned. So God places me in "disciplined community," as the Ramsey Colloquium puts it, or in a "community of disciples" who follow Christ as their Lord and whose lives are oriented towards this Lord as the source of their freedom and the measure of their behavior. It is in this community, and nowhere else, that God meets me through Word and Sacrament, and where I learn the boundaries and, paradoxically, the unlimited possibilities of the freedom that is mine only as gift, and never as self-determination.

The tradition defines God's sovereign gift of freedom in words that are familiar to all of us: covenant, election, justification, vocation, and sanctification. These are words I want to explore as we attempt to understand the morality of same-sex relationships among members of our church.

What is God's word on this subject? To begin with, I need to understand with you what we mean when we say that a "word" is addressed to the church, because there are many words to which you or I could appeal for authority. There are the words of psychology, sociology and genetics. There are the words of natural law and tradition. But all of these words are subject to the one Word whom we worship as Lord and to whom we owe obedience. So, in the familiar text of the Barmen Declaration:

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scriptures, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and beside the one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths as God's revelation.²

Jesus Christ is the one Word of God! Belonging to this Word, according to the Heidelberg Catechism, is our "only comfort, in life and in death." But what do we need to know, the Catechism asks, to "live and die in the blessedness of this comfort?" Three things:

First, the greatness of my sin and wretchedness. Second, how I am freed from all my sins and their wretched consequences. Third, what gratitude I owe to God for such redemption.³

"Sin"-another counter-cultural word! But without the consciousness of sin the Gospel itself makes no sense. There can be no productive discussion of marriage and homosexuality, or really of any other moral question, unless we can agree that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

Sin threatens our relationships with death. In the self-assertion of the ego against God not only our relationship with God but also every human relationship is brought into disorder. There is, in fact, no human covenant that is not wounded by our collective and individual rebellion against God's sovereign claim on our lives. This is certainly so in all the greater and lesser injuries that we inflict on each other-in heterosexual marriage, in celibate life, and in the partnerships formed by gays and lesbians. Sin distorts our life together as the Body of Christ, so that no contentious issue in the church can possibly be discussed without anger and mutual recrimination-particularly an issue like sexual morality, which exposes our deepest fears of alienation, loneliness and chaos. Sin distorts all of our relationships. Left on our own, we cannot live together as God intended.

But-thanks be to God!-God does not leave us alone. The Heidelberg Catechism affirms that we do have this "comfort, in life and in death," that we belong not to ourselves but to our "faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil."

THIS BRINGS US TO COVENANT, defined by the Westminster Confession as God's "voluntary condescension" which bridges "[t]he distance between God and the creature."⁴ "Covenant" is a critical concept in Reformed ethics, as you all know, and I cannot possibly say much about it a few minutes. But I agree with Max Stackhouse that "it is likely that nothing less than an understanding of and a commitment to covenantal mutuality under God can bring moral and spiritual coherence to what is otherwise experienced as a seething, chaotic mass of dominations and arbitrariness."

5

Moral and spiritual coherence! These are not empty words! We all sense that the scattered and broken pieces of our lives (and our relationships) belong together but we simply don't know how to re-build the structure we have demolished. But the Reformed tradition affirms that the coherence that eludes our best efforts has already been established definitively in Jesus Christ, whose obedient "Yes" to God becomes our own "Yes" through our foundational covenant: the covenant of Baptism.

At this point, God not only reestablishes the right order we have abandoned but actually incorporates us into God's being as Trinity, and here, with fear and trembling, we may begin to understand the origin and form of the covenant God establishes with us and the covenants we make with each other.

The self-disclosure of God in the covenant of Baptism reveals that God's being itself is covenant. In the reciprocal relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we learn that God's nature is not solitude, but communion. God's inherent nature is to be with others. The Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar says it better than I can:

God is not a sealed fortress, to be attacked and seized by our engines of war (ascetic practices, meditative techniques, and the like) but a house full of open doors, through which we are invited to walk. In the Castle of the Three-in-One, the plan has always been that we, those who are entirely "other," shall participate in the superabundant communion of life. Whatever we regard as the ultimate meaning of human life, be it giving, creating, finding or being given, being created and being found; all this is fulfilled in the original prototype: in the life of the eternal "With."⁶

The triune being of God is therefore the primal form of all of our covenants. Here, God chooses not to be alone but with and for the humanity God created. Here, God elects humanity to be God's covenant partner. Here, God's love cannot be contained but pours itself out with incomprehensible majesty into the creation and reconciliation of humanity. Christian covenants must participate in this Trinitarian structure, so that the order broken by sin and restored by God's sovereign decision in Christ becomes an order of being "with" others.

FROM OUR PARTICIPATION in this divine self-disclosure we may begin to describe the form of Christian covenant:

First, God chooses each of us for covenant, calls us into covenant life and uses covenant to complete God's work of conversion and sanctification in our lives. Election, vocation, conversion and sanctification! Nothing less is at stake in Christian covenant than the overcoming of our opposition to God! So every Christian covenant is a means of grace that draws us into the covenantal life of the Trinity. God works through covenants to convert us to a life with God and with others.

Second, Christian covenants are accountable to the community, and therefore must be sealed by public vows. In contrast to the secular theory of "contract," in which two independent persons with equal rights enter into an agreement, Christian

covenants are accountable to the Lord who comes to us in Word and Sacrament, that is, in the realized life of the Body of Christ in the Christian community. Jesus Christ is the Lord of every covenant, but the Covenant Lordship of Christ is mediated through his Body, the church. Therefore, covenant promises cannot be a private contract between two solitary persons but always a public demonstration of vows in the presence of the community.

Third, the community is accountable to the covenants made by its members. Because we are sinners, our covenantal relationships are always threatened by moral disorder. Covenant partners will turn again and again to the church which, as the Body of Christ, will call us back into relationship.

Fourth, Christian covenants create new life. Just as the triune life of God is not enclosed within itself but creates life in all of its forms, human covenants must also be creative. This is seen most clearly in the covenant of marriage, where (if it is God's will) a woman and a man extend life through the birth and care of children. But this creative vocation must be seen in all of our covenants. In some way, every Christian covenant must extend the boundaries of life. Every Christian covenant must be generative and generous. Every Christian covenant must say "Yes" to life.

HETEROSEXUAL MARRIAGE is the oldest and best of human covenants, and every other relationship descends from this encounter of a man and woman in marriage. This is obviously so because we are born in families and we owe our existence to heterosexual parents. But the tradition also says that in the marriage of a man and a woman we have a type, or an image, of the covenantal love of God for Israel and Christ for the church.

There is much discussion about whether same-sex relationships also should be called "marriage," but I think this is unwise. There can be no question that the Jewish and Christian traditions set heterosexual marriage apart from all other covenants. The confusion of marriage with other relationships can obscure the priority of heterosexual marriage in God's creative design and the Bible's orientation towards marriage as an analogy of God's passionate and faithful love for creation.

The marriage rites of all Christian churches testify to the tradition that marriage is a covenant between heterosexual partners. So does the only gay and lesbian denomination, the Metropolitan Community Churches, whose rite for blessing same-sex couples is called "union," not "marriage." In its "Order for Marriage," the Book of Worship of the United Church of Christ reflects this ecumenical consensus:

The scriptures teach us that the bond and covenant of marriage is a gift of God, a holy mystery in which man and woman become one flesh, an image of the union of Christ and the church?

But although heterosexual marriage is unique, it also participates in the Trinitarian structure that is common to all Christian covenants. Marriage, if I can borrow from St. Benedict's well-known image of the monastery as a "school for sinners," is the school where those called into this covenant learn how to be with another and not alone. It is a means of grace, through which God calls a man and a woman away from the terrible solitude of the alienated self into a life of self-giving love. Like other covenants, marriage is not closed in on itself but open to others, first, to the gift of children and family, second, to the church whose liberating boundaries encompass every Christian marriage. Like other covenants, marriage is accountable to Christ, who is the Covenant Lord of the married partners and of their family.

As the original human covenant revealed in scripture, marriage has a privileged claim on the ministry of the church. Through the tradition's use of marriage as an analogy of God's covenant with humanity, marriage is prior to every other covenant (except Baptism).

MARRIAGE IS ALSO A VOCATION, which means that to be a Christian marriage, God must summon a man and a woman into this relationship. But throughout its history, the church has also held an honored place for women and men who were called into a different covenant, but one by which they nevertheless were liberated by God to live a life with and for others. That covenant is celibacy, and to this we will now turn.

We are immediately in trouble here because most of us in this room are Protestant and we have had virtually no tradition of organized celibate community for more than 400 years—with a few exceptions, including one Augustinian monastery in Germany that transferred its allegiance to the Lutheran Reform in 1558 and somehow survived until 1675.⁸

The disappearance of vocational celibacy, along with the organized structures without which any covenantal life is impossible, ought to be a serious concern among us. Luther's reaction to the abuse of monastic vows was so extreme that at one point he wrote that chastity is impossible outside of marriage. Calvin was equally contemptuous of the monastic way of life, writing that "the cloisters, the cells, the holes of the monkeries smell of nothing but excrement."⁹ So there was no reform of celibate community in Protestant Europe, only a relentless attack on the monasteries that led to their dissolution.

Our break with 1,400 years of vocational celibacy has led us to believe that marriage is normative for all men and women, that is, the only vocation of relationship to

which Christians can aspire. But it was not so in the apostolic church, as Karl Barth reminds us:

It is obvious that in the New Testament community marriage can no longer be an obligation.... This is the fact, too lightly ignored by Protestant ethics in its glad affirmation of marriage that Jesus Christ himself, of whose true humanity there can be no doubt, had no other beloved, bride or wife, no other family or domestic sphere but this community. Certainly, He expressed Himself very definitely about the divine basis, the indissolubility and the sanctity of marriage (Mk. 10:1-12, Mt. 5:27-31.) He did not command anyone to abstain from it in practice as He Himself did.... [But] there are those for whom entrance into the married state is not only not commanded but temporarily or even permanently forbidden. We certainly cannot say, in the light of these sayings [of Jesus], that entrance into marriage is universally the higher way, the better possibility.... Our true point of departure is that for Paul marriage is always away (beside which he knows another and better) by which the Christian, becoming one body with his wife, does not deny the truth that he is one spirit with the Lord, but in his own way maintains and expresses it just as much as he who chooses a different path. 10

This "different path" is celibacy. So it is a mistake for us to see celibacy as either a compromise or a curse for those who, because of their sexual orientation or their situation in life, are unable to enter into the covenant of heterosexual marriage. Celibacy is a gift in which the person called into this life becomes fully human. Those who hear God's call to this life are not half-human. We cannot say they are incomplete because they have not fulfilled themselves in a union between a woman and a man. Nor should we understand celibacy as "asexuality" or merely as "abstinence" from a sexual relationship. Instead, celibacy is a particular disciplining of sexuality that liberates sexual energy for communion with others. We only have to look at the ecstatic visions of Roman Catholic mystics like St. John of the Cross or St. Therese of Avila to see how their sexual identity was not negated by celibacy but channeled into an intensely unitive relationship with Jesus Christ.

Celibacy therefore conforms to the Trinitarian structure of covenant. It is a life with and for, not a life apart from others. Like the covenant of marriage, it should be sealed by vows. We have no time to examine the arguments of Luther and Calvin against monastic vows, but by definition there should be no Christian covenant-including baptism, marriage and ordination in which public promises are not witnessed by the community. By abolishing the vow of celibacy, the Reformers also abolished the possibility of celibate life as a normative vocation alongside heterosexual marriage. The result impoverished the church and denied any structured expression for those

Protestants who were not called into marriage. A church without a covenantal vocation to celibacy is a church that is not fully oriented towards Jesus Christ-who, as Karl Barth reminds us, lived his life for others but not in the covenant of marriage. Barth cannot be ignored when he writes that "[t]he great example of a powerfully exercised freedom for celibacy is before us all." 11

On the other hand, the Protestant reaction against priestly and monastic celibacy was not groundless. Men and women like Martin Luther and Katherine of Bora were living under the burden of an enforced celibacy to which they were not truly called by God. We will take up this point again in a few minutes, because it will be a critical one in our discussion about same-sex relationships.

DO SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS conform to the Christian tradition of covenant? Can they become a means of grace through which God calls homosexual men and women to a life of conversion and holiness?

It is important to begin by acknowledging that homosexuality is most often experienced as inherent, as a "given," not a "choice." I know that some of us do not believe that the "givenness" of homosexuality is at all self-evident. But even the Ramsey Colloquium concedes-although rather reluctantly-that "some scientific evidence suggests a genetic predisposition for homosexual orientation," although it argues that there is no moral distinction between this disposition and a disposition towards "alcoholism or violence." The official Roman Catholic teaching on homosexuality is somewhat more generous. According to the U.S. bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family:

[I]t seems appropriate to understand sexual orientation (heterosexual or homosexual) as a fundamental dimension of one's personality and to recognize its relative stability in a person.... Generally, homosexual orientation is experienced as a given, not as something freely chosen. By itself, therefore, a homosexual orientation cannot be considered sinful, for morality presumes the freedom to choose. 12

But basing its argument on natural law, the Roman Catholic church prohibits the expression of love in a homosexual relationship because "only within (heterosexual) marriage does sexual intercourse fully symbolize the Creator's dual design as an act of covenant love with the potential of co-creating new human life." In the Roman Catholic view, a homosexual relationship is therefore "disordered" because it does not express the sexual encounter of a man and a woman and because it cannot be open to the procreation of children. For these two reasons; the church requires that gays and lesbians remain celibate.

The Roman Catholic teaching, in my opinion, is a creative but defective attempt to struggle with a difficult problem in a way that does not dishonor or condemn the

gay and lesbian members of the church. The church has broken decisively with the now widely-discredited model of homosexuality as a "disease." It accepts that homosexual orientation is, at least generally, an inherent dimension of the human personality of gays and lesbians. Roman Catholics therefore call into question the ethics of so-called "transformation ministries" that promise to "cure" or convert homosexuals into heterosexuals.

But the implications of the Roman Catholic teaching go deeper. Before 1975, Roman Catholic ethics assumed that homosexuality was always a vicious choice. It did not acknowledge the concept of "sexual orientation," which is a relatively modern construct. Since the only right expression of sexuality was either in heterosexual marriage or in a celibate vocation, then every sexual relationship between two women or two men must have been a conscious act of rebellion against the will of the Creator. This is clearly what Paul has in mind when he writes in Romans that "their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another." (Rom. 1:27 nrsv). Note the verbs "exchanged" and "giving up." Paul clearly is condemning men and women who have a choice. The Romans described by Paul, who were also guilty of many other crimes, had freely chosen to "give up" what was natural to them for what was unnatural. 13

But Paul is not describing the homosexuals who are the subject of Roman Catholic ethics. Here, sexuality is not "chosen," but "given." One therefore has to ask who "gave" this orientation, and what is the nature of the gift?

One gift of homosexuality, from the Roman Catholic viewpoint, could be a consecrated life of celibacy. Since that church continues to maintain an entire infrastructure of organized celibate communities, it can at least offer this alternative with some credibility. But Protestants have less credibility when we impose celibacy on our gay and lesbian members. Our churches support virtually no institutional forms of celibate life and seem to have returned to the idea of permanent celibacy merely as a backdoor solution to the disturbing presence of openly homosexual Christians in the ordained ministry. Confronted with the ecumenical consensus that homosexuality is not chosen, some Protestant churches have rediscovered the vocation of celibacy several centuries after it was abandoned by Luther and Calvin. But the rediscovery lacks moral conviction, and the spectacle of married bishops and ministers—who have no personal experience of vocational celibacy and have never considered this vocation valid for themselves imposing permanent celibacy on others is problematical, at least.

But even in the Roman Catholic community, enforced celibacy for homosexuals is equally problematical. Fundamentally, it violates the dignity of celibate life as

vocation. There is no evidence in either scripture or tradition that God created an entire class of human beings who sui generis must enter into covenants of celibate love. Celibacy in the Catholic tradition is always seen as a gift, a way of life to which God elects and calls some, but not most, men and women. As any Roman Catholic vocation director will tell you, to live a life of enforced celibacy when that man or woman does not clearly hear the divine calling to this covenant is almost always destructive. Enforced celibacy in the absence of God's call to celibate community is not necessarily a moral choice.

Protestants should know this well enough from our own history. One of the motors that drove thousands of Catholic priests, monks and nuns into the arms of the Reformation was the legal requirement of celibacy in the absence of a real vocation to this way of life. Eberlin von Gunzburg, a Franciscan friar who converted to Lutheranism between 1521 and 1522, was speaking for the generation of Luther and Calvin when he described the moral agony of celibacy divorced from vocation. Celibacy, he wrote, was

... a daily nagging of conscience and unrest of mind, by which all joy becomes suffering, all consolation saddening, all sweetness bitter.... [It] dulls and deadens the human senses, hardens the heart, and restrains natural honesty, leaving one in the end in so uncivil and inhumane a state, and so guilt-ridden and remorseful, that one hates salvation and the good in one's life and longs for misfortune. 14

Protestants should remember the spiritual and mental anguish of Gunzburg's monks before legislating permanent celibacy for lesbians and gays who may not be called to this demanding way of life! Nevertheless, some homosexuals are called to the covenant of celibate community, and so are some heterosexuals. The Roman Catholic church freely acknowledges the presence of both sexual orientations in its ordained ministry. But we should recognize with Karl Barth that celibacy is a "special vocation" and it would be a serious error to prescribe it when the vocation is absent.

So is there a vocation for those gays and lesbians God has not called to either celibate community or heterosexual marriage?

LIKE ALL OTHER WOMEN AND MEN, lesbians and gays are called by God to live a life not for ourselves, but for others. We are called to covenantal relationships in which our lives correspond to the inner life of God who is self-in-community, who in God's own being is self-for-others.

Gay and lesbian unions are covenantal relationships if they conform to this Trinitarian structure. Like heterosexual marriage and celibate community, these relationships are "schools for' sinners," in which two partners learn how to live in the

paradox of freedom that is unlimited precisely because it is limited by the other. The partner in a same-sex relationship is truly "other"-not through the complementarity of a man and woman, of course, but in the mutuality of two persons who in freedom choose each other and delight in being chosen. God creates these relationships because within the limits of our given sexuality we are always called out of isolation into community. Always. Through these relationships we learn what it means to be truly human, to care for another as much as we care for ourselves, to learn that a life enclosed on itself is death, but a life opened to other lives is God's gift and command to those who believe.

Neither same-sex relationships nor celibate community are objectively "equal" to heterosexual marriage. The marriage between a man and a woman has its own distinctive and privileged character. But neither are they "second-class" marriages. In fact, they are not marriages at all. But they are moral relationships and they have a specific claim on the ministry of the church.

Same-sex relationships are broken by the same powers of evil that threaten heterosexual marriage. All relationships are wounded by sin. That is why God gave us covenants and why Christ is the Lord of each covenant. When the church offers its ministry to same-sex partners it is affirming the reality of sin and therefore saying "no" to the false doctrine that there was no fall from grace and no need for the Cross. We often speak about "arming" and "celebrating" same sex unions but I am convinced the real pastoral need in the gay and lesbian community is the ministry of the church when our relationships are broken by sin. Like heterosexual couples, we are adrift in the ethical chaos of a society that exalts freedom over commitment, selfishness over self-sacrifice, and the *fulfillment* of personal "needs" over mutual responsibility. The church needs to be a safe harbor for these relationships-encompassed by ethical boundaries, discipline, accountability and tradition. In other words, gay and lesbian couples need structure, and we need just as much structure as heterosexual couples.

Same-sex couples therefore have a claim on the pastoral care of the church. The church must not abandon us to the moral disorder of a fallen world that is in rebellion against God. But the church's pastoral concern for these couples necessarily requires the public, liturgical expression of the vows that bind them together. Pastoral care without the public recognition of their vows would undermine the moral accountability of same-sex couples to each other and to the church. The congregation cannot legitimately expect conformity to ethical norms for same sex partners if it is unwilling to witness the vows in which those partners commit themselves-in the presence of the community-to fidelity and mutual obedience. If a congregation permits pastoral care but denies the public rite of union it is saying, in effect, "we expect you to honor your covenant but we don't want to hear about it outside the pastor's office." "Don't ask, don't tell" is a cruel way of life for same-sex couples and if that constraint were imposed on heterosexual partners, I doubt that many marriages

could survive. "Private" promises of fidelity apart from the community are like New Year's resolutions, easy to break. Moreover, the alienation of same-sex unions from the liturgical life of the community plays into the hands of the secular ideology that covenants are only private contracts between individuals who are accountable to no one but each other.

ULTIMATELY, THE PURPOSE of same-sex covenants, like the covenants of heterosexual marriage and celibate community, is conversion and sanctification. Through these relationships we cooperate with God's design for human life. They are means of grace, and we could not be fully human without them. St. Irenaeus, who heard God's call to the covenant of celibacy, says this about God's work of sanctification:

If you are the handiwork of God, await the Artisan's hand patiently. He does everything at a favorable time, favorable, that is, to you, whom He made. Offer Him your heart, pliant and unresisting. Preserve the form in which the Artisan fashioned you. Keep within you the Water which comes from Him; without it, you harden and lose the imprint of His fingers. By preserving the structure, you will ascend to perfection; God's artistry will conceal the clay within you. His hand formed your substance; He will coat you, within and without, in pure gold and silver; He will adorn you so well that "the Sovereign will delight in your beauty" (Ps. 44:12). But if you harden and reject His artistry, if you show Him your displeasure at being made a human being, your ingratitude to God will lose you both His artistry and His life. Making is the property of God's generosity; being made is a property of human nature. 15

God will adorn all of us "in pure gold and silver." But you and I cannot "ascend to perfection" alone. God takes us by the hand and leads us through the terrors of life, giving us companionship so we can learn how to live not for ourselves, but for others. Through these relationships of community and family, of heterosexual marriage, celibate love and homosexual partnership, God converts us towards the "life for others" that is the primal nature of the Trinity, towards the majestic generosity and creative power of the Three-in-One into which we were incorporated through Baptism, and we know this is true because Jesus Christ has been revealed to us as the first of many chosen, justified, called and sanctified by God.

Notes

1. "The Homosexual Movement: A Response by the Ramsey Colloquium," First Things, March 1994.
2. "The Theological Declaration of Barmen," United Church of Christ Web site at <http://www.ucc.org/believe/barmen.htm>.

3. "The Heidelberg Catechism," in *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ*, v. 2 (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1997), 329.
4. "The Westminster Confession," in *The Living Theological Heritage*, 561.
5. Max Stackhouse, *Covenant and Commitments: Faith, Family, and Economic Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 155.
6. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *You Crown the Year with Goodness: Sermons throughout the Liturgical Year* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 144.
7. *Book of Worship of the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: Office for Church Life and Leadership of the United Church of Christ, 1986), 327.
8. Francois Biot, *The Rise of Protestant Monasticism* (Baltimore and Dublin: Helicon Press, 1963), 65-67. At this point the vocation of celibacy-in-community disappears from Protestant history until the first deaconess community was founded in 1836. Crossing the Atlantic with German Reformed and Lutheran immigrants, the deaconess movement spread to the United States, and its memory is preserved in the many "Deaconess Hospitals" affiliated with the United Church of Christ and the Lutheran churches. But today the deaconess movement in North America is only a memory. In Europe, there has been a modest revival of Protestant monasticism--most notably the ecumenical Taizé community in France. Unlike the deaconess movement, Protestant monks have met a cool reception in the United States, at best. The only alternative for North American Protestants called to this vocation are the small Anglican communities that are closer in spirit to Rome than to Wittenberg or Geneva.
9. John Calvin, *Traite des scandales*, quoted in Biot, *The Rise of Protestant Monasticism*, 37.
10. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, v. IIIA (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 144, 146.
11. Barth, *Final Testimonies* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), 49.
12. Committee on Marriage and Family, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers" (Washington, D.C.: National Catholic News Service, Oct. 1, 1997).
13. Karl Barth shares with Paul the belief that homosexuality is a choice, not a "given" condition. The two or three pages he wrote in *Church Dogmatics* on homosexuality assume that gays and lesbians despise the opposite sex and choose partners of the same sex as a substitute for the woman or man they have rejected. Barth nowhere addresses the issue of sexual orientation or proposes an ethical response to it. Barth's assumptions were not unusual in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when he wrote his brief comments on homosexuality, and could have been a response to a pre-war homosexual movement

in Germany that exalted the male as superior to women-not a popular motif in the male homosexual movement today.

14. Eberlin von Gunzburg, quoted in Steven Ozment, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 79-80.

15. Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," quoted in *The Scandal, of the Incarnation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 72-73.

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