

The Church Under Fire:
Pro-homosexual Use of the
Bible in the Church and Its Institutions

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Barrett I. Duke, Jr., Ph.D.
Vice President for Research
Director, The Research Institute
The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission
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The effort to legitimize homosexuality in American culture is system-wide. One can hardly find an aspect of American life that has not been touched by a homosexual agenda.

The motive behind most of this activity is the desire to normalize homosexual behavior. The attempt to achieve this normalization can be found in some very unusual but extremely effective venues. For example, DC Comics has introduced homosexual superheroes in one of their comic books, *The Authority*. In addition, MTV late night dramas include homosexuals among their regular characters. And while the attempt was ultimately unsuccessful, we cannot overlook the effort of homosexuals to become scoutmasters in the Boy Scouts.

More troubling are the attempts by pro-homosexuals to indoctrinate children in environments where they are the most vulnerable—their schools. A recent story was told of a teacher in California who used her position to share with students about her girlfriend. When parents complained, the teacher was simply moved to another school, where she could share her story with other impressionable children. More disconcerting, yet, are the attempts to use public school sex education programs to teach children that homosexuality is a legitimate lifestyle. Perhaps the most disturbing of all is the decision by the school board in Provincetown, Massachusetts to begin teaching preschoolers about homosexual lifestyles.

All of the efforts to normalize homosexuality have not been directed at children. The recent box-office flop “The Mexican” which starred Brad Pitt and Hollywood’s darling Julia Roberts includes a scene in which Roberts’ character listens with rapt attention as a homosexual hit man describes his interest in men. This scene is followed by a scene in a motel room where the hit man decides to have a sexual encounter with another homosexual man in the bedroom, all accompanied by the happy encouragement of Julia Roberts’ character.

Another front that has seen considerable homosexual activity is in the legislative arena. Efforts abound to include sexual orientation as a protected status, in the same way people are guaranteed freedom from discrimination for their race or religious beliefs. Currently, some states include violence against a person on the basis of sexual orientation as a “hate crime,” and ten states have laws against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Hate crimes legislation passed by the U.S. Senate includes hate crimes against people because of their sexual orientation. If we want any sense of where things are headed, we need only to look across the border to Canada. Today, in Canada it is against the law to speak against homosexuality.

The inroads made by homosexuals have extended into the business world. Today, more than 100 of the Fortune 500 companies extend health-care benefits to same-sex couples. Some of these companies are probably only responding to the sea-change that lies just around the corner, since Vermont passed, and successfully fended off all efforts to reverse, their marriage laws to allow civil unions to be conducted for same-sex couples. What is more, passage of a civil union law similar

to Vermont's is being debated in Connecticut, California, and several other states. A survey of the 2,554 same-sex civil unions conducted in Vermont between July 1, 2000, when the Vermont law went into effect, and August 14, 2001 revealed that 2,044 of those unions were for out-of-state residents. It is easy to imagine that some of these newly married same-sex couples will use their Vermont-sanctioned union to force other states to accept their marital status.

The secular and civil spheres are not the only arenas feeling the effects of homosexual activism. Most Christian groups are being forced to deal with the role of homosexuality in their churches and related institutions. If it were up to the majority of the leadership of most of the mainline Protestant denominations, homosexuals would receive the full blessing of those denominations, and be extended full rights to participate at every level of ecclesiastical life.

It has been suggested that the interest that homosexuals have in being accepted by the church is that such acceptance will help to legitimize homosexuality in the broader community. I have no doubt this is true. If the church removes the stigma of sin from homosexuality, much of the broader culture will lose one of, if not the, primary reasons for rejecting it. But I do not believe that this is the only reason. Other motives appear as well. For example, it seems highly probable that many homosexuals believe they have been created homosexual by God. If the church were to acknowledge this, these people would feel affirmed. Other homosexuals are motivated by a sincere desire to serve God. They want nothing more than the

opportunity to serve God in their own faith traditions. This will not happen for them until these faith groups acknowledge the legitimacy of their homosexuality.¹

Regardless of the motivations for the current attempts to bring the homosexual argument to the church, the fact remains that the church is under a concerted effort to change its attitude toward homosexuality.

The most disturbing part of this assault on the church is the progress made by pro-homosexuals in convincing many in the church that the Bible is not as opposed to homosexuality as people think. A prime example of the progress being made on this front comes from right next door to the Southern Baptist Convention building – Christ Church Cathedral, an old Episcopalian church in downtown Nashville. Shortly after he arrived to assume his position as Dean of the church in September 1997, Reverend Kenneth Swanson was asked by the local paper to state his views on various issues, one of those being homosexuality. Swanson, who identified himself as a theological conservative, demonstrated his misunderstanding of that designation when he commented, “The Bible is basically silent about homosexuality. About eight passages mention it. But six of those are equivocal or mistranslations.”

It is not difficult to see how Reverend Swanson could come to that conclusion. The church, laity and institutions alike, is being overwhelmed with pro-homosexual messages. More significantly, many seminaries are experiencing vigorous homosexual activism. The seminary I attended for my Ph.D., the Iliff School of Theology, had a student-led Gay and Lesbian Concerns Committee, with their own

¹ Of course, the sincerity of their desire in no way validates their homosexuality, but we must come to terms with the fact that some homosexuals labor under the mistaken belief that their homosexuality is compatible with

bulletin board in the center of the seminary's main building and active participation in many of the seminary's policy-making committees.

That homosexual issues are a principle topic in seminaries today can be demonstrated by the number of texts on homosexuality available in seminary libraries. At Vanderbilt Divinity School a very basic search of the library's holdings produces 209 books on homosexuality. Of these 209, 133 have been published since 1990. An obvious upward trend can be seen when one compares publication dates. The library has one book addressing homosexual issues dating from the 50s, five books dating from the 60s, twenty-one books dating from the 70s, forty-nine dating from the 80s, 103 dating from the 90s, and just two years into this decade the library has accumulated thirty books addressing homosexuality published in 2000 and 2001, fifteen for each year. If that rate of publication and acquisition were to continue, Vanderbilt Divinity School would add 150 books on this topic during the first decade of this century.²

It is important to note that these are the books that have found their way into the Divinity Library. Vanderbilt University has nine libraries. One can find more books on homosexuality in those libraries, for example in the central library, the science library, and the bio-medical library. In other words, the librarians of the Divinity library have added 209 books addressing homosexuality over the years, especially the last twelve years, that they have considered to be particularly pertinent to the study of homosexual issues from a theological perspective.

their Christian faith.

² This count does not include books on broader issues that contain chapters on homosexuality or journal articles.

It should also not be overlooked that most of the books being published about homosexual issues are sympathetic to the pro-homosexual agenda. Many of them press their arguments and sympathies with help from the Bible. Thus it is no wonder that the church is being confronted with the issue of homosexuality. Everywhere church leaders and laity look, they are hearing sympathetic Bible-based arguments about homosexuality.

It is probably surprising to many evangelicals that people sympathetic to the normalization of homosexuality in the culture and the church have found so many ways to use the Bible to further their cause. Nevertheless, an examination of these works reveals a great level of creativity and imaginative effort at work. Authors have applied numerous methods of discovery and interpretation to the Bible and have published a great variety of materials promoting the normalization of homosexuality. While there are a number of methods at work, the majority derive from three broad theoretical categories: literary, sociological, and theological. The remainder of this paper will identify the ways in which those favorable to the normalization of homosexuality have used these methods to promote their agenda.³

Literary Arguments

Most of the work that is being done in this area stems from some aspect of literary theory. One can find numerous works that have identified the prominent

³ This paper looks at the way men and women within the church and its institutions are using the Bible to promote a pro-homosexual agenda. One can certainly also find many examples of people with a similar agenda outside of the church and its institutions. In order to provide some sense of how widespread the attempt is in the church and its institutions to promote a pro-homosexual agenda, I have attempted to identify the relationship of the various authors to which I refer to the church and its institutions. Such identification should not be interpreted to mean that the institution or all of its members share the pro-homosexual position of these authors.

Bible passages on homosexuality and then demonstrated through an exegetical process that the texts in question do not speak to the issue of homosexuality in the way that many Christians believe they do. For example, a typical exegetical approach will begin by assigning the Bible texts to various historical periods in the community's life and attempting to explain the motivation that prompted the production of a text in just that shape. This use of tradition-historical methodology can be very effective in the pro-homosexual enterprise because it places the emphasis on community priorities in the production of a text rather than on the text itself.

The tradition-historical approach is the typical one taken with Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Relying on the tradition-historical work of Martin Noth and more recent scholars, pro-homosexual exegetes discount the value of these passages for the homosexuality debate by explaining that they are part of a larger corpus, "The Holiness Code" (Lev. 17:1-26:46), which was developed for a specific purpose in Israel's life. The prominent attitude among non-evangelical scholars is that this code came into existence in its current form sometime in Israel's late pre-exilic, or probably early post-exilic period. Consequently, the value of the text to inform any areas of inquiry must be related to the question of why the community chose to develop this particular code. The response by David Bartlett, professor at Yale Divinity School, is typical. He says that "in both Leviticus 18 and 20 the people of Israel are called to define themselves over *against other* people, including the former inhabitants of the land."⁴ In other words, the Holiness Code is not about personal

⁴ David Bartlett, "A Biblical Perspective on Homosexuality," in *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Charlotte: Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, 2000), 27.

morality but community definition. In the post-exilic period, when the exiles were returning to the land, they needed to establish an identity, something that set them apart from the other people. The restrictions and requirements of the Holiness Code helped to establish these differences. So then, the Leviticus passages are not indicative of God's condemnation of homosexuality, according to this interpretation. They are rather a community-forming instrument. Morality is no longer the issue; community identity becomes the issue.

Patrick Miller, Professor of Old Testament Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, pursues the value of Tradition-Historical interpretation of homosexual issues into the Christian era. He observes that people of faith have been constantly reassessing their values and changing their positions on certain moral issues. As he reflects on the church's attitude toward homosexuality, he concludes, "So in our moral deliberation, we are, like the earlier community of faith at different times in its history, faced with having to determine what God wills of us in our time and how the fundamental guidelines work out in specifics today."⁵

Linguistic analysis often accompanies the tradition-historical pursuit in works that attempt to deal with the biblical texts exegetically. One often encounters attempts to redefine or limit the meaning of certain key words in the passages that speak about homosexuality. This application of linguistic analysis often assists the pro-homosexual argument by limiting the application of the passages about homosexuality to certain types of homosexual behavior.

⁵ Patrick Miller, "What the Scriptures Principally Teach," in *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, ed. C. L. Seow (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), 55.

Perhaps the most egregious example of pro-homosexual linguistic wrangling was started by Derrick Bailey. In his book *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* he argued that the verb *yadah* in Genesis 19:5 should be translated according to its more common meaning, “to get acquainted.” Given this, Bailey explained that what was happening in Genesis 19:5 is that the men of Sodom simply wanted to become acquainted with the men in Lot’s house. Their insistence on inconveniencing these visitors was a serious breach of the code of hospitality. In other words, the men of Sodom were guilty of inhospitality.⁶

While Bailey felt confident that he had resolved the problem of Genesis 19 for homosexuals, most scholars have disagreed with him to a point. Many scholars today who are promoting a pro-homosexual agenda acknowledge that the word *yadah* in Genesis 19:5 refers to sexual activity, but they minimize that fact by claiming that there is a bigger issue in the writer’s mind. For example, Bartlett is certain that the use of the word *yadah* means that the men of Sodom wanted to rape Lot’s visitors. However, he does not deny that inhospitality was an issue of concern. He comments, that “there is more involved than homosexuality. What the men threaten is rape, intercourse with unwilling victims. They threaten rape against two angels, who represent the presence of Yahweh. There is a direct sin against the divine involved. They use violence against Lot and against his house. They do act inhospitably toward his guests. Even within this one story, their ‘wrongdoing’

⁶ Derrick Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd., 1955; reprint, Hamden, CT: The Shoestring Press, Inc., 1975), 3-4. Bishop John Spong relies on this argument in making his case for the legitimacy of homosexual behavior. He comments, “. . . I further believe that anyone who reads this biblical narrative with an open mind will discover that the real sin of Sodom was the unwillingness on the part of the men of the city to observe the laws of hospitality.” John Spong, *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 142.

involves far more than homosexuality.”⁷ Phyllis Bird, Professor of Old Testament at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary, concurs. She claims, “The honor due a guest is violated (at least by threat) in the most objectionable way conceivable, by sexual humiliation.”⁸

Often other Bible passages that refer to Sodom and Gomorrah are used to help support the notion that God’s judgment in Genesis 19 was about something more than just homosexuality. Based on “the broader list of sins” in Jeremiah 23:14 and Ezekiel 16:49-50, Bartlett believes that the writers of those texts believed that God’s judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah was about more than only homosexuality.⁹ Ken Sehested, Executive-Director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, offers a similar interpretation of Jesus’ understanding of what the incident with Sodom and Gomorrah was really about. He recognizes a common theme in the Sodom and Gomorrah incident and Jesus’ condemnation of the towns that will not welcome his disciples (Matt. 10:11-15). According to Sehested, Jesus denounces the towns that will not welcome his disciples for their abuse of power. The inhabitants of those cities have the power to help strangers who visit them, but they withhold that help from the disciples. Because Jesus compared the fate of those towns to the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, Sehested surmises that Jesus considered their sins to be of the same nature, a form of inhospitality rooted in the abuse of power.¹⁰

⁷ Bartlett, “A Biblical Perspective on Homosexuality,” 26.

⁸ Phyllis Bird, “The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation,” in *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture*, ed. David Balch (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 147.

⁹ Bartlett, “A Biblical Perspective on Homosexuality,” 27.

¹⁰ Ken Sehested, “Biblical Fidelity and Sexual Orientation: Why the First Matters, Why the Second Doesn’t,” in *Homosexuality and Christian Faith*, ed. Walter Wink (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 55.

The non-Pauline references to Sodom and Gomorrah that appear outside of the gospels (Jude 7 and 2 Peter 2:6-10) are dealt with quite easily. Bartlett sums up the general attitude toward these passages. He notes that Jude 7 “seems to suggest that part of the misdeed (of Sodom) consisted in the fact that the citizens of Sodom lusted after angels (“alien flesh”). The passage in 2 Peter certainly implies that there was more going on in Sodom than one attempted homosexual rape” since 2 Peter 2:8 indicates that Lot was vexed day after day by the lawless behavior of the people of Sodom.¹¹

Similar redefinition occurs with certain terms Paul employs in Romans 1:24-27. For example, David Fredrickson, Associate Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, traces the use and meaning of Paul’s term *physika chasis* (“natural use”) through various extra-biblical sources and concludes that Paul is not condemning homosexual activity in itself. He is condemning sexual activity that is driven by passion. Frederickson summarizes: “Unnatural use, from this perspective, has less to do with the gender of the persons having sex and more with the loss of self-control experienced by the user of another’s body.”¹²

In addition, many writers point to the dominance of cultic language in Romans 1:26-27 to shift the emphasis in the passage. Bartlett, maintains that Paul’s use of the word *allasso* (“exchange”) reveals the association Paul’s makes between idolatry and homosexuality. Paul uses this word in the clauses, “and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image” (v. 23), and “they exchanged the truth of God for

¹¹ Bartlett, “A Biblical Perspective on Homosexuality,” 28.

¹² David Frederickson, “Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24-27,” in *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture*, ed. David Balch (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 206.

a lie” (v. 25). He uses the same word in v. 26 to describe the women’s illicit behavior, “their women exchanged their natural function.” However, since Paul relates the homosexual behavior to the prior sin of idolatry, it is idolatry that brings the judgment of homosexuality. Bartlett claims that this connection between idolatry and homosexuality has ramifications on any attempt to apply Paul’s teaching on homosexuality to the contemporary debate. He concludes that “those who really want to be ‘Pauline’ in their understanding of homosexual practices today would have to argue that people who engage in homosexual acts are being punished for their idolatry.”¹³

A similar narrowing of meaning takes place with the words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, translated as “male prostitutes” and “homosexual offenders” respectively by the NIV in 1 Corinthians 6:9. For example, John McNeill, a former Jesuit argues, “Neither the *malakoi* nor the *arsenokoitai* were necessarily homosexuals; the former were simply debauched individuals and the latter were probably male prostitutes or those given to anal intercourse, which is not necessarily nor exclusively a homosexual activity.” Given this understanding of these terms, McNeill moves to Paul’s argument in Romans 1:26 and declares that “the persons referred to in Romans 1:26 are probably not homosexuals—i.e., those who are psychologically inclined toward their own sex—since they are portrayed as ‘abandoning their natural customs’”¹⁴

¹³ Bartlett, “A Biblical Perspective on Homosexuality,” 30

¹⁴ John McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*, 4th ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 56. John Boswell follows this line of reasoning as well. He asserts that “the persons Paul condemns are manifestly not homosexual: what he derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons.” John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Western Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 109.

Such linguistic exercises as McNeill's have assisted numerous pro-homosexual writers to insist that the Bible nowhere condemns loving, committed, homosexual relationships. Robin Scroggs, professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary, for example, compares Paul's use of *arsenokoitai* to early Rabbinic legal discussions. In those circles, the term referred to the active participant in sexual encounters. He then interprets the meaning of the word in conjunction with the word *malakos* in 1 Corinthians 6:9, and concludes, "if the *malakos* points to the effeminate call-boy, then the *arsenokoitais* in this context must be the active partner who keeps the *malakos* as a 'mistress' or who hires him on occasion to satisfy his sexual desires."¹⁵ Given this interpretation, Scroggs argues that Paul was only condemning pederasty.¹⁶

L. William Countryman, Professor of New Testament at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, rejects Scroggs' attempt to read these two words together. Instead, he attempts to understand Paul's use of *arsenokoitai* by analyzing the use of the word in 1 Timothy 1:10. Through a rather convoluted comparison of 1 Timothy 1:8-11 to the pattern of the Ten Commandments, he concludes that the term "could refer to the male, slave or free, who used his sexual attractiveness to ingratiate himself with a rich and elderly lover in the hope of receiving a substantial legacy, thus replacing more legitimate heirs."¹⁷

Spong takes redefinition even further. He imagines that the three words in 1 Timothy 1:10, *pornois*, *arsenokoitais*, and *andrapodistais*, translated "adulterers,

¹⁵ Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 108.

¹⁶ Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 116.

perverts, and slave traders” in the NIV, refer to an interrelated group: “the male who desired sex with a young boy, the young boy himself, and the slave dealer who trapped the boy for sale.”¹⁸

Moving to the more contemporary literary methods one finds pro-homosexual writers making direct homosexual connections with certain characters in the Bible. These identifications are made literally, analogically, and typologically. We are all familiar with the attempts to describe the friendship between David and Jonathan as a homosexual relationship.¹⁹ But there are other efforts to make homosexual connections with the biblical texts. Christopher King, an Oxford D.Phil. and Episcopalian priest, represents a good example of the analogical identification of Bible characters with the homosexual issue. King reads the Song of Songs in such a way that the characters are all analogous to certain contemporary types of people. The Shunamite is the woman consumed with sexual desire for someone her parents find unacceptable. The male lover then represents the homosexual partner, and the mother represents all those forces that attempt to maintain the status quo, including family expectations and norms. His appropriation of the Song leads him to see it as an example of a courageous lover whose sexual longing drives her to ignore the mores of her day and risk everything, including her mother’s acceptance, in her pursuit of her sexual interests.²⁰

¹⁷ L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Social Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 127-28, 202.

¹⁸ Spong, *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality*, 153.

¹⁹ See for example, Tom Horner, *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), 26-39.

²⁰ Christopher King, “A love as Fierce as Death,” in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 136-42.

In a less textually violent way, Michael Piazza, Senior Pastor of Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, Texas, looks to Nehemiah to give direction to the homosexual community. Piazza points to Nehemiah's example of servant leadership, and stresses that this is the type of leader homosexuals need to be in order to further their quest for acceptance and rights in the face of opposition.²¹ Gary Comstock, university Protestant Chaplain and visiting Assistant Professor of Religion at Wesleyan University, devotes a large section of one of his books to the same proposition. He looks throughout the pages of Scripture for examples of people with whom the homosexual can relate in his struggle to free himself from oppression. His favorite model for the homosexual activist is Queen Vashti in the book of Esther. He suggests that "we counter the attempt to make [Vashti's punishment] a brief reminder of what is unacceptable behavior and insist instead that Vashti's was a righteous action and an unjust punishment."²²

What I find most disturbing about Piazza's and Comstock's use of the Bible is their willingness to use characters from a book that condemns the homosexual lifestyle. Their appropriation of Bible characters as examples for homosexual activists represents more than just an attempt to provide an adequate model; it represents the appropriation of the very book that divides those who reject

²¹ Michael Piazza, "Nehemiah as a Queer Model for Servant Leadership," in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 115-23. Interestingly, a staff member at Cathedral of Hope is also engaged in promoting the appropriation of the Bible by homosexuals. Mona West, Director of Spiritual Development at the Cathedral of Hope, contributed an article to the journal *Theology and Sexuality* in which she argues for "reading the Bible from the social location of Queers." She states, "I submit that the point of reference for a Queer reading of Scripture is the notion that *the Bible is our friend*." By approaching the Bible from this perspective, she claims, "We are able to find our story within its story." Mona West, *Theology and Sexuality* 10 (1999): 34-35.

²² Gary Comstock, *Gay Theology without Apology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1993), 56.

homosexuality and those who accept it. These men have taken the holy and made it theirs.

Sociological Arguments

It is also possible to find the application of sociological theories to the question of homosexuality. These applications are often part of a complex integration of theories and methods as the writer attempts to bring many disciplines to bear on the question of the Bible's position on homosexuality. Without doubt, the entire tradition-historical approach to interpretation is sociological in nature. It seeks to understand the social situation that gave rise to the formation of texts.

In addition, one can find more straightforward applications of sociological theory to this issue. For example, Paul Smith, Pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Kansas City, Missouri, considers the Bible's prohibition against homosexuality as an example of a cultural bias that is outdated. He sums up his argument: "It is true that heterosexual relationships are the only model of sexual intimacy assumed and prescribed throughout the Bible. Slavery and patriarchy are also assumed as appropriate models consistently throughout the Bible. Most Christians have rejected slavery and many have rejected the idea that men should be in charge of women. To claim that biblical culture only portrays one kind of sexual relationship is an argument from biblical culture, not biblical principles."²³

²³ Paul Smith, "The Bible and Homosexuality: Affirming All Sexual Orientations as Gifts from God," in *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Charlotte: Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, 2000), 46. Numerous pro-homosexual writers fall back on the cultural argument to deny the relevance of the Bible on the matter of homosexuality. For example, Scroggs states, "The fact remains, however, that the basic model in today's Christian homosexual community is so different from the world attacked by the New Testament that the criterion of reasonable similarity of context is not met. The conclusion I have to draw seems inevitable: *Biblical judgments against homosexuality are not relevant to today's debate.*" Scroggs, *The New Testament and*

Walter Wink, Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary, approaches the cultural argument from a supposedly scientific perspective. He credits Paul's objections to homosexuality to his pre-scientific understanding of the phenomenon. He surmises, "Paul knew nothing of the modern psychological understanding of homosexuals as persons whose orientation is fixed early in life or perhaps even genetically in some cases."²⁴ In light of the new information provided by science, Wink asks if it is not appropriate to "reevaluate the whole issue in the light of all the available data and decide what is right, under God, for ourselves."²⁵

Another prominent sociological approach to the issue is the attempt to understand the Bible's prohibition against homosexuality in light of the practice of homosexual behavior in other cultures. This cross-cultural comparison yields examples of homosexual behavior that is intended to communicate dominance by one over another. Phyllis Bird locates the Old Testament's prohibition of homosexuality within this sphere of meaning. She compares examples of the treatment of homosexual activity in contemporary cultures and concludes, "It appears most likely in the patriarchal ethos of ancient Israel that homosexual activity carried a sense of male shame for the partner 'forced' to assume the 'female' role (or shamelessness for the male who assumed it voluntarily). . . . Behind the prohibition is, I think, a fear of deviation from the socially dominant pattern of male-female

Homosexuality, 127. Spong argues this point as well. He states that Paul "did not or perhaps could not imagine a life in which the affections of a male might be naturally directed to another male." Spong simply writes off Paul's statements about homosexuality as another probable example of his "ill-informed, culturally biased prejudices." Spong, *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality*, 149-52.

²⁴ Walter Wink, "Homosexuality and the Bible," in *Homosexuality and Christian Faith*, ed. Walter Wink (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 36.

²⁵ Wink, "Homosexuality and the Bible," 46.

intercourse, a biologically favored pattern grounded in reproductive needs but by no means limited to them—as the toleration of prostitution evidences. In the final analysis, it is a matter of gender identity and roles, not sexuality.”²⁶ Consequently, since these are now socially outmoded concepts, the prohibition against homosexuality should not be heeded.

Theological Arguments

Pro-homosexual theological readings of Bible texts also frequently occur. We are familiar with the standard arguments that use the example of Jesus’ emphasis on grace to trump any attempts to speak to the issue of homosexuality as inappropriate behavior. This is only one of the many ways the Bible is being used for theological arguments. Perhaps the most inventive is that put forward by Kathy Rudy, Assistant Professor of Women’s Studies at Duke University. Rudy uses the Sodom story to propose a reorientation of the philosophical underpinnings of Christian ethics. She has adopted Bailey’s interpretation that “the sins of Sodom are not sexual stories at all but sins of inhospitality.” She corroborates this opinion by pointing out that Ezekiel 16:49 and Matt. 10:14-15 emphasize poor treatment of others in Sodom.²⁷

Rudy proposes two new categories for the structural framework of the Christian ethic – unitivity and hospitality. The Sodom story contributes to her

²⁶ Bird, “The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation,” 157.

argument because the behavior of the men of Sodom violated these two principles. They were certainly not hospitable, and they were also insensitive to the needs of others. She says that unitivity means that “we begin our moral reflection not in the individual human subjects, but rather with the whole, the community, the Body of Christ.”²⁸ She argues that an ethic of hospitality will enable us to “invite others into the power of God, to welcome them into this wonderfully transformative power which realigns the world, to see each other as Christians rather than as men or women, gay or straight, rich or poor. . . . With hospitality, we have no way of condemning homosexuality because the very notion of same or different sex would fall away in favor of our common identification of Christian.” As one reads Rudy’s work, the feminist and liberationist rhetoric is obvious. In one place she proclaims, “There is no longer an internal realm for women to keep up and an external world in which men compete against each other. Rather all genders are collapsed into Christian, and all Christians go about the seamless work of God.”²⁹

Another common argument addresses the issue of the church’s rejection of homosexuality as an example of theological inconsistency. The argument is made that the Bible condemns other activities in the same passages in which it condemns homosexuality, but the church does not observe them. So Bartlett comments, “Much of the Holiness Code (which includes Lev. 18 and 20) including the rules for sacrifice and the dietary regulations, is ignored by almost all Christians in their ethical reflection. There may be reasons for holding that these particular verses on

²⁷ Kathy Rudy, *Sex and the Church: Gender, Homosexuality, and the Transformation of Christian Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 125.

²⁸ Rudy, *Sex and the Church*, 112.

²⁹ Rudy, *Sex and the Church*, 128-29

homosexual practices have normative value, but the fact that they are in the Bible is hardly sufficient reason.”³⁰

Nancy Duff, Associate Professor of Reformed Theological Ethics at Princeton Theological Seminary, offers a reinterpretation of the principle theological arguments made against homosexuality – the *imago Dei*, complementarity, and procreation. The traditional position is that homosexuality violates these biblical ideas. In its traditional formulation the *imago Dei* finds expression in the relationship between male and female, complementarity is the joining together of the opposite sexes, and procreation can only be achieved through heterosexual union. Duff suggests that the traditional theological understanding of these categories is inadequate. She argues that to emphasize relationship between members of the opposite sex as the primary expression of the *imago Dei* limits the full range of possible applications of this term. For example, she claims, “Many theologians and ethicists who hold to this view find it difficult to give full affirmation to those called into the single life.” Further, she insists that complementarity is an important issue in same-sex relations as well: “two women or two men can be far more radically different from one another than a man and woman prove to be.” Finally, she argues that “the world’s overpopulation coupled with the existence of thousands of children needing to be adopted demand a reinterpretation of the biblical injunction to ‘be fruitful and multiply.’” She desires to broaden the definition of what it means to “give life.” She says, “Because many homosexual couples provide a loving environment for their children (theirs

³⁰ Bartlett, “A Biblical Perspective on Homosexuality,” 27.

genetically or by adoption), it is incorrect to maintain that homosexual activity is not life-giving.”³¹ For Duff, “life-giving” is more than procreation, it is a nurturing concept.

Finally, Mark McClain-Taylor, Associate Professor of Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, argues that homosexuality is not a sin because homosexual practice does not contravene the good of what God has done through Jesus Christ. He calls for a theo-ethical hermeneutic of grace and sin. He confesses:

What I am pressing for here is something beyond repeating of Scriptural positions (however studious), beyond a recounting of traditional viewpoints (however distinguished), and beyond scientific citation (however clothed in expertise). I am looking for consciousness about “the imaginative construal” whereby Christians sense that their God has done, or is doing, something good (however clothed in expertise). I am looking for consciousness about “the imaginative construal” whereby Christians sense that their God has done, or is doing, something good in and for the world. What is that ideal, that gift, that new thing? . . . If one judges a practice or orientation like homosexuality to be sinful, one must then show how that practice violates or moves against the good or is somehow contrary to the event of grace.³²

³¹ Nancy Duff, “Christian Vocation, Freedom of God, and Homosexuality,” in *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture*, ed. David Balch (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 275. Theodore Jennings, Assistant Professor of Theology at Chicago Theological Seminary, reaches the same conclusion. He says, “We have seen that principles normally invoked to make the proscription of homosexual acts (in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13) do not in fact justify such a procedure.” Theodore Jennings, “Homosexuality and Christian Faith: A Theological Reflection,” in *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith: A Symposium*, ed. Harold L. Twiss (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1978), 62.

³² Mark McClain-Taylor, “But Isn't It a Sin?” in *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, ed. C. L. Seow (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), 82-83. Sehested affirms McClain’s approach. He asks, “Is

Conclusion

One can find numerous other applications of the various disciplines to the Bible's stance on homosexuality. While a thorough critique of all these positions is required, the point is that the case for normalizing homosexuality is being pressed from within the church and its institutions by a vast and diverse group of sympathizers with strong convictions and an arsenal of approaches. The challenge for those of us who still believe that the Bible's prohibition of homosexual behavior is valid is to develop an adequate and comprehensive response in order not only to counter the propaganda being released in our churches, our seminaries, and in the minds of Christians in just about every venue, but to equip Christians with the tools needed to articulate the biblical position on this matter and to resist future attempts at indoctrination.

An additional challenge exists as well. The church must come to terms with the entire issue of homosexuality and develop a comprehensive ministry approach to homosexuals. It is imperative that the church reassert the Bible's moral high ground, but that it do so out of a comprehensive strategy designed not merely to convince homosexuals that

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homosexuality compatible with Christian faith? Is heterosexuality compatible with Christian faith? Uncircumcised or circumcised? None of these questions, I would suggest, is relevant. To quote sacred Scripture, 'We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will' (Acts 15:11)." Sehested, "Biblical Fidelity and Sexual Orientation," 60.

the homosexual lifestyle is sinful. This strategy must include a genuine love for people trapped in the homosexual lifestyle that seeks first to minister and love, not to condemn. The church must find a way to reach homosexual men and women, help them to find their way out of the homosexual lifestyle, and include them as equal participants in the life of the church. Until the church develops such an approach, it is likely that attempts to create an alternative thus false spirituality will thrive.

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