

The Rev. Dr. Ronald Kydd
Honourary Assistant
St. Peter's Anglican Church, Cobourg
Diocese of Toronto
and Associate Professor of Church History
Tyndale Seminary
Toronto, Ontario

September 12, 2014

The Voice of Jesus

Introduction

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to the members of the Marriage Commission. You have agreed to undertake a task which will seriously break into your already busy and productive lives. Thank you. May God bless and sustain you.

Having been deeply engaged in discussions related to same-sex issues for more than a decade now, I have written and read papers, talked with many individuals face-to-face, and listened to a significant number of strongly personal accounts. Thinking back on it all, I find I have one overriding concern: we have not adequately listened to the voice of Jesus. On the basis of our familiarity with the gospels, we make assumptions about how Jesus would respond to various people. There can be no question but that Jesus is, and will always be, profoundly loving and receptive. However, he does make statements which are directly relevant to the marriage of persons of the same sex, and what he says is unambiguous. In this submission, I will be attempting to hear what he is saying as clearly as possible. To do that I will take two steps. First, I will present the passages from scripture which preserve Jesus's comments. Secondly, I will examine carefully the word in the passages which is of greatest relevance to our discussion of same sex marriage. The word is *porneia*.

Passages

There are two passages:

Matthew 15. 15-20

¹⁵ But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” ¹⁶ Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication (*porneia*), theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.

Mark 7. 17-23

¹⁷ When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, ¹⁹ since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication (*porneia*), theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Obviously, the passages are parallels, and they may in fact refer to the same series of events. However, this does not mean that we should say that these two passages should just be melted into one. What the appearance of this teaching in two passages does is show how important it was. A lot of different people remembered these words of Jesus and took them seriously. Initially these words of Jesus likely circulated orally, but, on the other hand, they may also have been written down fairly quickly once, twice, or even several times. These accounts may have made the rounds of many communities. In the end, there were two people, the authors of these gospels, who wished to work these stories into coherent accounts of the Jesus whom they had come to see and experience as God. The pictures of Jesus they produced are quite different, shaped by the audiences for whom they were writing and by their ideas about how their

Lord should be presented. Throughout the ages the Church has assumed that these authors were writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.¹

We should also note that as was often the case, Jesus was engaged in sharp controversy in these passages. These are not “throw-away” lines. What we have here is well thought through, definite teaching responding to fundamental misunderstanding of how one lives before God.

The basic meaning of the passages is fairly clear. Engaging in any of the behaviours listed would mean that the “capacity for fellowship with God is destroyed, not by material uncleanness (food, hands), but only by personal sin.”²

Finally, we see that the lists which appear in the two passages differ both in the number of items presented and in the order in which they appear. This reflects the focus of the two evangelists. In fact, if we take the passages seriously, they are inclusive enough to give us all pause for thought.

The item in the lists I want to focus on here is *porneia*, translated in both passages by the English word “fornication.” The question I am raising now is “What did the word mean as Jesus used it in these two passages”?³

Porneia

In taking my second step, I am responding to the question I just raised, and I note that the word already had a significant history before it became associated with Jesus. Kyle Harper stated

¹ If you should want to follow up on how the Gospels came into existence, I would recommend Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2006) and Birger Gerhardsson, “The Secret of the Transmission of the Unwritten Jesus Tradition,” *New Testament Studies* 51 (2005): 1-18.

² Friedrich Hauck, “κοινόω,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Hereafter, *TDNT*.), 3, 809. See also R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 584-7; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Vol. 33B, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), pp. 433-7; Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (2nd. ed; London: Macmillan and New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1966), pp. 342-7, and Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26*, Vol. 34A, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), p. 372-81.

³ In fact, Jesus also used the word in discussions of divorce in Mt. 5.32 and 19.9. Examining these two passages as well as the ones I am focusing on here may help to throw light on all of them.

recently that *porneia* only appears in four classical Greek authors.⁴ Much earlier in their study of the word group to which *porneia* belongs, Friedrich Hauck and Siegfried Schulz found not only just four authors who used the word in classical literature, but only four times when it appears.⁵ Both they and Harper agree that in the classical Greek world the word group usually referred to a female selling herself for sex, but it could also refer to a male who does the same thing.

Turning to the Old Testament, Hauck, Siegfried, and Harper agree that the older material does not impose an outright prohibition on extra-marital sex for male Israelites.⁶ However, in thinking about that one should keep in mind both the commandment forbidding adultery and the pictures in the historical books of disaster and tragedy resulting from sexual promiscuity. Then later a major shift occurred in the way *porneia* was understood. In the prophets idolatry came to be seen as spiritual fornication with the nation of Israel, men and women, selling themselves to strange gods and scorning the worship of Jehovah—remember the lessons taught by Hosea and his adulterous wife (Hos. 1.2; 4.12-13).⁷

A further step in the redefinition of *porneia* took place in what is known as the “Second Temple” period (c. 530 BC to 70 AD). Commenting on how the word was used during that time, Kyle Harper said: “In Hellenistic Judaism we witness a widening of the term’s meaning to indicate sexual acts of male commission [emphasizing that it was not just women who did this] and to include virtually any form of prohibited sexual relationship.”⁸ The word came to refer to a wide range of behaviours for which examples from the literature of the period are numerous.

⁴ “*Porneia*: The Making of a Christian Sexual Norm,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131 (2011): 369.

⁵ “πόρν, πόρνος, πορνεία, πορεύω, εκπορνεύω,” *TDNT*, 6, 581. They also point out that the word is used to refer to homosexuality in Demosthenes (*On the False Embassy*, Demosthenes with an English Translation, Translated by C.A Vince, M.A. and J. H. Vince (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press and London: William Heinemann, 1926), 19, 200).

⁶ Hauck and Siegfried, p. 585 and Harper, “*Porneia*,” p. 370.

⁷ See also Jeremiah 13.27 and Ezekiel 43.7-9 among other passages.

⁸ Harper, “*Porneia*,” p. 362. And Harper saw this as crucial for the meaning of the word in the New Testament.

In *The Book of Jubilees*, dating from approximately 135-105 BC, *porneia* refers to marriage outside ethnic boundaries (7.21), to homosexuality (16.5, 20. 9), to adultery (39.6), and to extra-marital sex generally (20. 3, 6).⁹ In the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, dating from about the same time as *Jubilees*,¹⁰ *porneia* is spoken of as “the mother of evils,”¹¹ and as referring to incest¹² and homosexuality.¹³ The enigmatic *Sibyline Oracles* cover the same ground, applying the word to adultery, homosexuality, and marriage outside the ethnic group.¹⁴ The Dead Sea Scrolls are represented in the discussion by the *Damascus Document*, which applies *porneia* to sex beyond the law generally¹⁵ and also to incest.¹⁶ Finally, the famous Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria (25 BC – 50 AD), also produced relevant material. Kyle Harper stated that, “For Philo, legitimate sexuality was exclusively marital,”¹⁷ and in *The Special Laws* Philo used *porneia* to take a strong position against homosexuality.¹⁸ In fact, material I have cited is only a sampling of what is available, but it is adequate to show that the Jews of the Second Temple period had come to see that there were real boundaries to sexual intercourse. It was limited to the marriage of a woman and a man.¹⁹

⁹ In *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, Edited by R. H. Charles (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913). Scanned and edited by Joshua Williams—www.pseudepigrapha.com. Accessed Sept. 8, 2014.

¹⁰ See H. W. Hollander and M. De Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Commentary* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), p. 4.

¹¹ *Testament of Simeon*, 5. 3 in *The Greek Versions of the Twelve Patriarchs*, Edited by R. H. Charles (Oxford: Clarendon Prss, 1908), p. 22. <https://archive.org>. accessed Sept. 8, 2014.

¹² *Testament of Reuben*, 1.6, in Charles, p. 2.

¹³ *Testament of Benjamin*, 9.1, in Charles, p. 226.

¹⁴ Jewish and Christian material gathered dating from 150 BC to 180 AD, *The Sibylline Oracles*, Books III-V., Translated by H. N. Bate (London: SPCK, 1918), 3, 764, p. 80 and 4, 33-66, p. 84f. <https://archive.org>. accessed Sept. 8, 2014.

¹⁵ *Damascus Document*, 4.17, in Florentino Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English*, Translated by Wilfred G. E. Watson (2nd.ed; Leiden: Brill and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) p. 35.

¹⁶ *Damascus Document*, 5.8-11, Martinez, p. 36. Kyle Harper commented, “Fornication is thus deployed polemically to describe any sexual contact violating the law” by the ultra-strict Qumran sect—“*Porneia*,” p. 373.

¹⁷ Harper, “*Porneia*,” p. 373.

¹⁸ *The Special Laws*, 37f, in *Early Jewish Writings*, [www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book29.html--accessed Sept.8](http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book29.html--accessed%20Sept.8), 2014.

¹⁹ At least one Stoic philosopher living at the same time, Musonius Rufus (c. 20-30-101 AD.) held a similar position—Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2013) , pp. 73-76.

The world in which Jesus grew up was one in which the surrounding culture had come to a firmly exclusive view of sexual morality—sexual intercourse was to be restricted to the traditional marriage. What happened after Jesus? What did the position of the early Christians come to look like? In fact, the position became even more clearly expressed and more consistently expected. Hauck and Siegfried said, “The NT is characterized by an unconditional repudiation of all extra-marital and unnatural intercourse.”²⁰ James D. G. Dunn refers to Paul’s (and Jewish) “antipathy to *porneia*, ‘sexual immorality,’ which probably covers the whole range of unlawful sexual intercourse”. . . ; Paul’s opposition to the abuse of sex included “the whole range of illicit sexual practice, including homosexual practice and sexual immorality in general,” and he was convinced that for Paul “marriage is the only appropriate context for sexual activity.”²¹

The picture I have been describing has been strengthened and clarified by Kyle Harper. He is an historian and classicist teaching at the University of Oklahoma. His book dealing with the transformation of the sexual morality of the ancient world is written from an excellent, scrupulously historical perspective,²² displaying no religious inclination whatsoever on his part. In fact the tone of his writing occasionally suggests little sympathy for the Christians he is talking about. Harper said, “*Porneia*, fornication, went from being a cipher for sexual sin in general to a sign for all sex beyond the marriage bed, and it came to mark the great divide between Christians and the world. Same-sex love regardless of age, status, or role, was forbidden without qualification and without remorse.”²³ Again: “The significance of *porneia*, in historical

²⁰ Hauck and Siegfried, p. 590.

²¹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, U.K., 1998), p. 121,

²² Drawing in the process a highly affirmative review from eminent early Christian scholar, Peter Brown—“Rome: Sex & Freedom,” *The New York Review of Books*, December 19, 2013.

<http://nybooks.com/articles/archives.2103/dec/19/rome-sex-freedom>.

²³ Harper, *Shame*, p. 85.

terms, was precisely that it gave a single name to an array of extramarital sexual configurations not limited to but especially including prostitution,²⁴ and Harper makes it very clear that early Christians threw all the resources they could mobilize into the attempt to uproot them all.

The position to which Hauck, Siegfried, Dunn, and Harper lead us is clear—the Church which grew out of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus saw *porneia* as inclusive of all forms of sexual intercourse outside of the marriage of a woman and a man. To the studies of the ones mentioned above could be added the work of other biblical scholars including Jacque Dupont,²⁵ Aidan Mahoney,²⁶ J. A. Fitzmeyer,²⁷ Joseph Jensen,²⁸ Marcus Bockmuel,²⁹ and David Janzen,³⁰ all of whom hold similar opinions. Certainly, the range of sexual behaviour which these scholars see as included in *porneia* is confirmed by noting passages in the New Testament in which the word appears.³¹

The world in which Jesus lived had come to a clear understanding of what *porneia* meant: all sexual intercourse outside of marriage. The early generations of Christians after Jesus, and the Church into late antiquity, embraced that position even more strongly. In the light of this, what might Jesus be expected to have meant when he talked about the highly negative impact of *porneia* along with the other items in the lists in Mt. 15 and Mk. 7? In his work, Kyle Harper attributes much of the responsibility for the “sea change” in sexual morality that Christianity carried out in the first four centuries of its existence to Paul.³² Paul played an important role, but

²⁴ Harper, *Shame*, p. 12.

²⁵ *Mariage et Divorce dans L'Évangile: Matthieu, 3-12 et parallèles* (Abbaye de Saint-André: Desclée de Bruwer, 1959), p. 106.

²⁶ “A New Look at the Divorce Clauses in Mt 5,32 and 19,9,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 30 (1968) : 31.

²⁷ “Matthean Divorce Texts,” *Theological Studies* 37 (1976): 208

²⁸ “Does *Porneia* Mean Fornication?” *Novum Testamentum* 20 (1978): 180.

²⁹ “Matthew 5.32; 19.9 in the Light of Pre-Rabbinic Halakhah,” *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989): 294.

³⁰ “The Meaning of *Porneia* in Matthew 5.32 and 19.9: An Approach from the Study of Ancient Near Eastern Culture,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 80 (2000): 68.

³¹ See Ac. 15.20; 1 Cor.5.1;5. 9; 6.15; Gal. 5.19; Eph.5.5; Heb.13.4, and Jude 7.

³² Harper, “*Porneia*,” p. 375 and *Shame*, p. 12.

Harper overstated it. As with virtually everything else basic to the Christian life, the tide turned definitively with Jesus.

Jesus spoke carefully. He came in our world because his love knew no bounds, and because he wanted to remove what it is that impoverishes our lives and distances us from God. He spoke against all those behaviours he listed, including *porneia* in all its forms, because he wanted to lift human beings beyond their corrosive influences.

Conclusion

In various forms and with diverse degrees of credibility and effectiveness, the conversation regarding same sex blessings and same sex marriage has been protracted. It has gone on in consultations, sensitivity groups, conferences, papers, tears, candidness, and manipulation. However, we have needed to hear Jesus's voice more clearly than we have. This submission is an attempt to help that happen. I have highlighted two passages in which Jesus comments on sexual behaviour, and I have attempted to understand what he meant by the language he used. For him *porneia* meant sexual intercourse outside of the marriage of a woman and a man. We need to pay attention.