

# Seeking to be Faithful in the Uneasy Middle

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## Introduction

Let me begin by commending you for the serious way in which you as a parish are approaching the issue of same-sex orientation and relations. There are many ways in which you might profitably spend a series of Sunday afternoons. The fact that you have chosen to do so in this way reflects well on your willingness to think through this important issue and to do your thinking within a Biblical and theological perspective.

Let me also thank you for the opportunity to make my own small contribution. I probably should say that I do not go looking for opportunities to speak on this subject. I am not the sort of person who thrives on controversy and conflict; I prefer to spend my energies on what we have in common as Christians rather than on what divides us. Still, as a professional interpreter of the New Testament, I realize that I have a responsibility to participate in this debate on the basis of my own areas of knowledge and expertise.

Ten years ago when the issue of sexual orientation was beginning to become a pressing one within the Anglican communion, the national church put together a video and study package entitled “Hearing Diverse Voices—Seeking Common Ground.” Since I had already done a couple of diocesan talks on the issue, I was asked to contribute the component that dealt with the Biblical texts. In my introduction, I described myself as occupying the “uneasy middle” on this issue. And this is still where I find myself, pulled in two directions by commitments and considerations that I feel to be valid but that nevertheless are in tension.

On the one hand there is my commitment to the orthodox tradition of the church, as grounded in Scripture and shaped by the ecumenical councils and creeds. This tradition has not only understood marriage to be the exclusive context for sexual relations but has also invested a great deal of theological capital in marriage both as a means of grace and as a symbol for the relationship between Christ and the church. I see this as the primary pole in any Christian discussion about human sexuality, one that we need to take with all seriousness. And yet on the other hand, there is the actual experience of real people—some of whom I know as colleagues, students and friends; people who are just as committed as I am to Christ and to the church—who nevertheless bear witness to the fact that same-sex orientation is a given part of who they are. Many of them have in good faith sought to be transformed into heterosexuals through various means, but without success; a good number have eventually entered into committed same-sex relationships that they describe as nurturing and grace-filled.

And so, on the one hand, I can appreciate the anxiety of many Christians who fear that the church will find itself loosed from its theological moorings if it allows personal experience to function as a kind of new revelation, trumping scripture and tradition in the process. And yet, on the other hand, I recognize the force of the argument put forward by other Christians, that scripture and tradition bear witness to a series of experiences—having to do with the inclusion of Gentiles, the abolition of slavery, the ordination of women, the acceptance of divorce and remarriage, and so on—experiences in which the church has felt itself being led by the Spirit into uncharted waters but

without veering from the navigational compass point provided for us by the gospel.

Thus I find myself somewhere in between two poles—scripture and tradition on the one hand; and the real experience of faithful Christians on the other. I consider scripture and tradition to be the primary pole, and thus am not prepared to take a position that would require me to abandon it in order to align myself to the other. Yet what is tradition but the legacy of a series of attempts to live out the gospel in new and unforeseen contexts? And so neither am I prepared to dismiss out of hand the witness of other Christians, equally committed to Christ and the gospel, who experience same-sex orientation as a given part of their human identity and who believe that they have been able to combine faithfulness to the gospel with a committed, life-long gay or lesbian relationship.

What I want to do today is a revised version of the presentation that was adapted for the “Hearing Different Voices” video. I will present the arguments from both the traditional and the revisionist sides of the debate, putting the arguments into the form in which I feel their pull most strongly from my position in the middle. In addition, I will provide my own assessment of the various arguments. To provide a visual sense of these various voices, I will use three podiums or lecterns—a lectern on one side for the traditional position, one on the other side for the revisionist position, and one in the middle for reflections in my own voice.

One other preliminary comment. I am as much concerned with the way we use scripture in this debate as I am with the position that we hold individually or that we finally arrive at as a church. From time to time I play a little squash. If I and my partner play according to the rules and use our equipment with care, then even if I end up on the losing side of the score (as often happens!), I will nevertheless have improved my general fitness level and my ability to play the game. But if we play recklessly, disregarding the rules and the proper use of the equipment, we may end up injuring ourselves, damaging our equipment and compromising our ability to play in the future. So in what follows I will pay particular attention to the rules of proper interpretation, trying to steer us away from tactics that might injure the church and impair the ability of scripture to function as norm and guide for our life together.

Since I am dealing with the New Testament and since the traditional side sees the Biblical material as providing its strongest argument, we will start there.

## 1. The Text

### 1.1 Traditional: The New Testament Material Speaks for Itself

Wherever it addresses the issue of sexual intercourse between members of the same sex—so speaks the traditionalist voice—the New Testament is categorical in its denunciation. The most important passage is Romans 1:26-27, which reads:

*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. (NRSV)*

Here you cannot deny the force and meaning of Paul’s statement. He is clearly speaking about sexual intercourse between members of the same sex, both male and female; and he condemns such activity as being unnatural, degrading and deserving of divine punishment. Moreover, although the

other New Testament references are briefer, they nevertheless confirm this judgment. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-11 we find two “vice catalogues”—lists of sinful practices and behaviours. In each list we find people described as *arsenokoitai*. While this is the first appearance of the word in Greek literature, its meaning cannot be in doubt. It combines the roots “male” (*arsēn*) and “bed” (*koitē*), the latter term often used of sexual relations (e.g., Rom 13:13: “not in ‘bedding’ or licentiousness”). Since the two words are also found in the Greek version of Leviticus (“You shall not go to bed with a male as with a woman,” Lev 18:22; also 20:13), it is probable that the new word *arsenokoitai* has been coined on the basis of the text in Leviticus. So the word in these lists refers to people who engage in homosexual activity and who therefore, according to these New Testament authors, are among those who “will not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9). In addition, the authors of Jude and 2 Peter condemn the people of Sodom and Gomorrah for their sexual depravity (Jude 7; 2 Pet 2:6-10). In short, wherever the New Testament speaks of same-sex relations, it condemns the practice in a clear and unequivocal way.

## 2. The Text and its Context

### 2.1 Revisionist:

#### **The New Testament Does not Address the Contemporary Situation**

But—comes the reply from the other side—you can’t interpret texts without seeing them in their original contexts. And when you do, it becomes clear that the New Testament authors were not speaking of the same thing that we are—faithful, committed relationships of mutual love entered into by those whose natural orientation is towards persons of the same sex. Thus these texts are not really relevant to the present discussion. There are two things that you have to recognize.

In the first place, the predominant form of same-sex relations in the Greco-Roman world was pederasty—a relationship between an adult male and an adolescent boy. The voice this time is that of Robin Scroggs, author of the book *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (1983). In its ideal form, he points out, such relationships were widely valued in Greek culture as part of the way in which young men were educated and incorporated into adult society. The older man would serve as a kind of mentor to the younger, overseeing his education and guiding his development. In the context of this relationship it was considered appropriate for the younger (the *erōmenos* [loved one]) to sexually gratify the elder (the *erastēs* [lover]), though apparently not the reverse. The adult would generally also be married; correspondingly, it was assumed that once the adolescent became an adult, he would likewise marry and become a “lover of boys.” Given the Greek valuation of all things male, it was a common theme in Greek thought that the love of boys was a nobler form of love than the love of women.

Of course, the ideal is one thing; actual practice another. There is plenty of evidence of behaviour that often fell short of this ideal: fierce jealousy and competition for the most attractive youths; youths who sold themselves simply for pleasure, often taking measures to prolong their adolescent appearance well into adulthood; and so on.

And so, in interpreting Paul’s condemnation of same-sex relations, we need to recognize the context in which he was speaking. In his culture the primary form in which men would “give up natural intercourse with women” was pederasty. Indeed, the vice list in 1 Cor 6:9-10 says as

much. For here the word *arsenokoitai* is paired with *malakoi*—literally, “soft ones”—a word with sexual overtones, used in particular to refer to the passive partner in same-sex intercourse. Thus the New Testament is referring to a specific type of same-sex relationship, one which almost everyone today would condemn. Even in its ideal form, this type of relationship was lacking in mutuality and was based on a power differential that always carried with it the potential for exploitation.

And there is a second indication that Paul’s statements do not address our own situation and thus are irrelevant to the discussion. Here it is John Boswell, author of *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (1980), who is taking up the argument. In Romans 1 Paul assumes that those whom he condemns for their same-sex activity are acting “against nature.” That is, he assumes that they are heterosexuals “by nature” who are going against their natural impulses in engaging in sexual relations with others of the same sex. Indeed, since many of the people he has in mind were also married—e.g., the older member of a pederastic relationship—his assumption would have had a solid basis in reality. Thus his comments have nothing whatsoever to do with the phenomenon under discussion in our own day—people who “by nature” are oriented towards others of the same sex. Indeed, to insist that such people act as heterosexuals is to force them to do what Paul objects to, that is, to engage in sexual activity that is “against (their) nature.”

## 2.2 The New Testament Statements are Categorical

Not so fast, say a chorus of voices on the other side, the most prominent of whom is now Robert Gagnon. Of course it is important to read a text in its context. But you have misrepresented the context and have misread the texts in the process.

First, a more thorough examination of the evidence demonstrates that there were many instances in the Greco-Roman world of sexual relationships between men where the partners were both adults. This is the voice of Mark D. Smith, who has demonstrated (“Ancient Bisexuality and the Interpretation of Romans 1:26-27,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 [1996] 223-56) that pederasty was by no means the only model in antiquity. Scroggs both overlooked some of the evidence and forced evidence that he did deal with into a pederastic mold where it did not really belong. If Paul was speaking just about pederastic relations, he would have had to make it clear that his condemnation was restricted to this particular form of sexual behaviour.

But in any case his condemnation is categorical. Even if pederasty was the primary form of same-sex behaviour known to Paul, he condemns it in terms and for reasons that would apply to *any* form of same-sex practice. What he opposes in the practices he condemns is not those aspects of pederasty that would differentiate it from (say) gay and lesbian relationships today, but precisely those things that would be held in common by both ancient and modern practice—namely, sexual relations between persons of the same sex.

Several things point in this direction. One is the element of mutuality in Paul’s language: “men . . . consumed with passion for one another.” A second is the fact that he also includes women in his condemnation. Evidence of lesbian activity in antiquity indicates that this differed considerably from the pattern of pederasty, being much more a relationship between equal partners. Finally, there is Paul’s statement that such sexual activity is “unnatural” (not *phusikos*, *para phusin*). This language is commonly found wherever same-sex intercourse is condemned in antiquity, either by Jews or by Greeks and Romans. And where it is found, the usual context is that

the “natural” form of sexual intercourse is that which has the potential of producing children. In other words, the “nature” in view is not the “orientation” of any particular individual, but the usual function of sexuality in the whole created order.

To be sure, Paul had no awareness of the concept of sexual orientation in its contemporary understanding as a given part of individual human identity. But if we had the opportunity to bring him up to date on the matter, he would probably reply: Thanks for the update, but this is really what I’ve been trying to say all along. The voice this time is that of Richard Hays, in his book *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. Hays points out that “givenness” is precisely Paul’s point in Romans 1. The chapter does not consist of a list of freely chosen activities that displease God and leave one morally culpable before God. Rather, the list functions as a sign of the more basic alienation that has already taken place. Because humankind has fundamentally rejected God, God “gave them up” to various patterns of behaviour—patterns that come with the territory for a race that has abandoned God; patterns, in other words, that are “given” rather than freely chosen. For Paul, sin is fundamentally bondage (or better, a power that holds us under its sway), and only derivatively is it to be seen as action displeasing to God. It is only people who were born after the Enlightenment who would think that sin is simply a matter of freely chosen acts of wrongdoing, and that the surest guide to what *is* right is what *feels* right and comes naturally. But—Paul would say—we already knew that sin was bondage to a fallen state of affairs over which we have no control and from which we need liberation. You are not saying anything new.

For all these reasons, then, it is clear that Paul’s statements are categorical; they cannot be limited to a context that is disconnected from our own.

### **2.3 The View from the Middle**

I fully agree with the position that legitimate Biblical interpretation depends on a proper understanding of the intention of the author in the author’s social and cultural context. It is quite inappropriate to take some Biblical injunction—for example, Paul’s instructions about head-coverings in 1 Corinthians 11—and to plunk it down in our own context without recognizing how Biblical injunctions were shaped by cultural contexts that in many cases were quite different from our own. However, I remain unconvinced by the arguments on the revisionist side that Paul’s statements were restricted in their intent and so would not apply to the kind of gay and lesbian relationships that we know today. While there is more to be said about the significance of our own context, as far as Paul’s statements are concerned, I understand them to be categorical in their intent.

## **3. The “Weightier Matters of the Law”**

### **3.1 Same-sex Activity as a Marginal Issue**

Well, categorical or not, you have to agree with me that statements about same-sex practice are few and far between in the New Testament. Jesus has nothing to say on the topic at all; nor do any of the Gospel writers; nor any of the other writers outside of the letters that bear the name of Paul. On the other hand, Jesus has plenty to say about God’s love for those who have been excluded and marginalized, and also plenty to say against those who think that they have the inside track on

God's will about this or that form of behaviour. It is irresponsible of us to make central what for the New Testament writers was peripheral.

And while we are talking about Paul, there is one other thing to be said about his statements in Romans 1, and specifically about his larger strategy in the passage. In Romans 1-2 Paul is engaged in what might be called a rhetorical sting operation. In these chapters, he is engaged in a debate with a Jewish (or Jewish Christian) debating partner. The goal of his argument here is to make the point that all—Jews as well as Gentiles—are sinful and under condemnation. Addressing his Jewish opponents in chapter 1, he baits his trap by pressing all their hot buttons, including their revulsion for Gentile sexual practices. By the end of the chapter he would have had them eating out of his hand: Preach it, Paul! Those Gentiles certainly are deserving of condemnation! But in chap 2, he springs the trap. Aha, he says, while you have been smugly sitting in judgment of the Gentiles, you have been judging yourselves; for you are just as guilty of sin.

The function of these verses, then, is not to teach about sexual morality for Christians. Paul's purpose here is not to condemn same-sex activity per se, but to take advantage of his hearers' overeagerness to condemn others, including others involved in same-sex activity. By the time one gets to the end of chapter 2, it is precisely those who rush to condemn such people who have the egg on their chins. So let's not major on the minors; let's put the emphasis where Jesus and the NT writers put it.

### **3.2 Heterosexual Marriage the Biblical Norm and Thus a Central Issue**

I agree that Paul has his own particular purposes in Romans 1-2, and that he takes advantage of what he knows about his debating partners to bring these purposes to fulfilment. But you can't really mean to say that Paul would have been happy if any of his readers took his rhetorical ploy as a warrant for engaging in same-sex relations, any more than he would have been prepared to condone coveting, gossiping, envy, murder, strife or any of the other activities mentioned in the list.

But the more important point is that, for Paul and the whole Biblical culture, rejection of same-sex relations is just the negative side of a coin whose positive side is heterosexual marriage. While the New Testament may not have a whole lot to say about homosexuality per se, Jesus and almost all the New Testament writers do say a lot about marriage. Heterosexual marriage is everywhere understood to be the divinely-intended pattern, rooted in the nature of the created order itself, and thus the normative context for sexual activity. Everywhere the positive side of this coin appears, the negative side is present by implication. Since marriage is treated as a major topic in the New Testament, and since both the scriptures of Israel and first-century Judaism were unanimous in seeing same-sex activity as a violation of God's intentions concerning marriage, it is misguided and reckless to see the topic of same-sex relations as a minor and insignificant part of the ethical teaching of the New Testament.

### **3.3 The View from the Middle**

Again I find the voices from the traditional side to be more persuasive here, at least if the issue has to do with the concerns of the New Testament writers in their own day and not with the hermeneutical issue of how we interpret their writings for our own. Certainly we need to steer the ship of the church along the broad central streams flowing from the New Testament—God’s gracious initiatives to redeem the whole world in Christ—and to keep from being diverted into the various minor eddies and backwaters. It would be misguided and reckless to take minor and isolated aspects of the New Testament—e.g., the reference to baptism on behalf of the dead (1 Cor 15: 29); the prohibition of wearing jewelry in 1 Peter (3:3)—and turn them into major issues. But it seems clear to me that in the first-century Jewish culture within which the New Testament took shape, criticism of same-sex activity was not a self-contained and isolated entity but was an integral part of assumptions about marriage and the created order.

## **4. Interpreting the Text in Our Context**

### **4.1 The Need for a Developmental Hermeneutic**

Well, thanks to both of you for bringing up the topic of marriage in first-century culture. All three of us know that we have long since abandoned major aspects of the view of marriage and the role of women that all New Testament writers took for granted. Silence of women in church; exclusion from most spheres of ministry; subordination to men in general and subservience to husbands in particular; no right to initiate divorce, which was a male prerogative—these things were all part of a patriarchal culture that the New Testament endorsed but that we no longer feel to be binding on us as Christians.

This cultural shift, of course, has affected society as a whole and not just the church. But the point I want to make here has to do with the dimension of New Testament interpretation. One important factor in the liberation of women from patriarchy—not only in the church but in the wider culture as well—has been the pioneering activity of Christians who have seen it as the logical outworking of the liberating message of the gospel. Paul got a glimpse of the full scope of this liberation when he declared that in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female” (Gal 3:28). While he may not have seen the implications of this as clearly in the case of male and female as in that of Jew and Gentile, still the inclusion of Gentiles in the early church serves as the first case-study in the unfolding implications of the gospel. The first crisis in the life of the early church had to do with attempts to exclude categories of people from full and equal membership in the Christian community, and the lesson learned was that the gospel has to do with breaking down those harmful structures that would subjugate and exclude, and with liberating those who were imprisoned within them.

And the inclusion of Gentiles was just the beginning. Since then we have learned similar lessons in other situations, especially with respect to the institution of slavery and the ordination of women. In each of these situations there has been an intense debate between traditionalists and revisionists; in each case the question of New Testament interpretation has been a prominent element in the debate; and in each case the traditionalists have accused the revisionists of threatening the very essence of the church by their unfaithfulness to scripture. I am sure that a generation or two down the road people will look at the present debate with the same sort of puzzlement and

bemusement with which we look at the arguments about scriptural interpretation in the debates over slavery.

What we have realized through all this is that the role of scripture in the church is a dynamic one. Scripture provides us not with a full, complete and final rule book, but rather with a set of theological first principles, the full implications of which we continue to discover in response to the work of the Spirit in our midst. On many issues, what the Bible gives us is not final answers, but core principles together with the resources and guidelines needed for a responsible, developing understanding of God's will. These theological first principles come to their sharpest focus in the person of Jesus and the message of the gospel. And what comes into focus here is a message that has to do with love, liberation and inclusion—the love of God for all people, created in God's own image in all their dazzling diversity; the liberation of people from structures of sin and oppression; and the inclusion of all people within the new community of love and liberation.

One element in this dynamic model of interpretation, then, arises from the scriptures themselves. Another, however, has to do with ongoing developments in our understanding of the world God has made, through the process of scientific investigation. Again there has been a whole history of development, as we have had to struggle to incorporate new discoveries into our Christ-centred understanding of the world. The nature of the solar system, the age of the earth, the evolutionary development of all living species, the role of the subconscious—all of these discoveries have initially been seen as standing in conflict with what was understood to be a Biblical view of the world, but eventually have been incorporated into revised worldviews that can now be seen as fully in keeping with the spirit and thrust of the Bible at a deeper level. And the nature of same-sex orientation is just the latest in this list. It is clear that such orientation is innate; that is, it is not something that people choose for themselves but is instead part of their constitution from a time before they ever could even think about choice. More than that, recent studies seem to suggest that same-sex orientation may have a physiological basis, either in the structure of the human brain or even in one's genetic makeup.

#### **4.2 Heterosexual Marriage Still the Biblical Norm**

Don't be swept away too easily by my learned opponent, says Robert Gagnon from the other side. You are not being given the full story here. First, I agree wholeheartedly that Biblical interpretation is a developmental thing. I have no desire to turn the clock back on slavery, the ordination of women and so on. But in these cases, the Bible's voice is not clear and unambiguous. With respect to the ministry of women, for example, for every statement in Paul's letters restricting their activity there are two others referring to the presence of women as full participants in Paul's mission of proclamation and church planting. With respect to slavery, nowhere is it assumed that slavery was a good thing, and nowhere is the institution of slavery presented as something that God commanded or ordained. In these cases there is sufficient tension and ambiguity in the New Testament witness to provide us with warrant for revision. But this is decidedly not the case with same-sex activity. In this instance—as with other sexual deviation such as incest—there is no ambiguity, no countervailing Biblical voices that would provide us with justification to apply a developmental hermeneutic. In fact, the disturbing thing about my opponent's logic is that it would apply equally well to forms of sexual expression that we would not want to endorse, such as (consensual, non-



exploitative) incest. If sexual intercourse between two consenting adults of the same sex is to be condoned, why not sexual intercourse between two consenting adults of the same nuclear family?

Nor is it the case that science provides us with a clear warrant. While the initial announcements received a great splash in the media, more careful examination of the science has put big question marks over the claim that sexual orientation is genetically or physiologically determined.

But I do agree wholeheartedly with my opponent in one thing: the gospel has to do with liberation. What God has done for us in Christ is to provide us with the spiritual power that is needed to break the power of a disordered sexual constitution, to redeem our fallen humanity and to form us into the kind of human beings that God intended from the beginning. Transformation, not accommodation, is what we should be aiming for.

### **4.3 Sexual Orientation as a Given and Therefore as a Gift**

OK, let's see if I've got this right: sin is essentially bondage to a state of affairs that comes with the territory in a fallen world; a disordered sexual orientation is one aspect of this state of affairs; God has sent Christ to defeat sin and to liberate us from its power. It must follow, then, that if I turn to Christ he will liberate me from this state of bondage, and provide me with a sexual orientation in keeping with what you say are God's intentions for human life. Well, I've tried it, and it just doesn't work that way. This may be a tidy theological package, but it is an abstraction that fails to acknowledge the agonizing reality of personal experience.

The voice this time could belong to any of a whole crowd of people. Bishop Gene Robinson is just the latest, but earlier in Canada there was the case of Jim Ferry, a former classmate of mine and author of *In the Courts of the Lord* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1993). In Jim Ferry's book, for example, he tells a story that is similar to those of many gay and lesbian Christians—namely, a period of time in which he desperately wanted to be heterosexual; in which had various intense spiritual experiences as he prayed for God to change his sexual orientation, sometimes believing for a while that this had indeed happened; in which he even entered into marriage. But the whole experience was agonizingly and frustratingly negative, leading him to the conclusion that this was the way God wanted him to be. He had been willing—even desperately eager—to be changed; God, apparently, saw no need for change.

If this is the way God intends him to be, then it follows—he concludes—that his sexual orientation needs to be seen as a gift to be celebrated. If he is acceptable to God as he is, then he should be accepted by the church as well.

## **5. Concluding Observations from the Middle**

The spokesperson for the traditionalists got the first word, so I thought it was only fair that the spokesperson for the revisionist position got the last word. Or, more precisely, the next to last word. I have a few concluding comments to make.

First, I agree that we need to work with a developmental model of interpretation—one that recognizes an enduring core or touchstone in the gospel, but that also allows for an ongoing process in which the church continues to work out the implications of the gospel and to bring it to bear in a responsible manner in changing cultural situations.

Second, as I indicated at the start of this dialogue, I find myself trying to work out a faithful position in between two fixed points. On one side, from the beginning of the Biblical story to its end, heterosexual marriage is clearly the norm, one so deeply rooted in the Bible that it cannot be displaced without doing serious damage to the story itself. While our understanding of marriage has developed in much more egalitarian directions, this is simply a continuation of developmental vectors that are already present in the Bible. The corollary of this would seem to be that same-sex orientation is one of the realities of a world that in many ways falls short of God's intention for the created order. But on the other side, there is the widespread witness from our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in Christ that their attraction to persons of the same sex is a given and unchangeable part of their personal makeup—something they didn't choose; something, often, that they have tried to change, even appealing to God for help; something that they have had to accept as part of who they are. It may well be that from the perspective of the Biblical story same-sex orientation needs to be seen as something that does not correspond to God's intentions for human sexuality and thus as one manifestation of the brokenness of the world. But even if this is the case, it would be quite wrong to assign any individual culpability. If there is any fault to be found, it is not with any particular gay or lesbian individual but with sinful and broken humanity as a whole. All of us, in one way or another, fall far short of God's intentions for us, often through no particular fault of our own.

Third, I am struck by the importance of interpretive models in the whole discussion. At one extreme there is the model of marriage, as many are arguing that a gay or lesbian relationship should be seen as just another form of marriage. At the other end, there is the model of what King James language describes as fornication—categorically illicit sexual activity. Also at this end there is the model of celibacy as a religious calling, held out as the only option for gays and lesbians apart from heterosexual marriage. Further, on the revisionist side there have been consistent appeals to the models of slavery, the ordination of women, and so on—instances where the church has moved beyond the restrictive injunctions of scripture in the spirit of the liberating message of scripture. From a viewpoint in the middle, however, the most instructive model, it seems to me, is that of divorce and remarriage. Clearly the Biblical ideal is that of marital fidelity “till death us do part.” Further, some statements of Jesus are categorical in their rejection of divorce and remarriage. But one of the realities of human existence is that many marriages, even among sincere and faithful Christians, fall short of this ideal, dying before their time, becoming destructive rather than means of grace and growth. In such cases, the church has accepted divorce and possible remarriage as something that, while not conforming to the ideal, is still a responsible and even grace-filled way of dealing with such a reality. (A somewhat similar model, perhaps, is the experience of the African church with polygamous converts.) The point of the model is not that we think of a gay or lesbian relationship as a kind of marriage; instead, for those who believe that same-sex orientation was not God's original intention for human sexuality, it provides a way of seeing such relationships as nevertheless responsible and even grace-filled.

Fourth, in an increasingly post-Christian world, as our surrounding culture becomes more secular, the gospel will become increasingly counter-cultural. The way we discuss and deal with issues of sexual orientation should not simply be a pale reflection of debates, agendas and decisions that take place outside the church and are driven by commitments and agendas other than those derived from the strange story about Jesus of Nazareth. In Flannery O'Connor's apt phrase,

“You shall know the truth and the truth will make you odd.” We need to prepare ourselves for increasing, gospel-centred oddness.

Fifth, while the gospel is an inclusive message, we should not treat inclusiveness as a discount coupon to be applied against the cost of discipleship. The gospel is more than simply a divine endorsement of our proclivities. The Christian way is a path of discipleship, one that cuts across the natural inclinations, tendencies and orientations of us all.

Finally, some words of Paul to a church dealing with a contentious issue of its own, found later on in the epistle to the Romans: “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you might with one voice glorify the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 15:5-6).

## TEXTS

**1. Romans 1:26-27 (NRSV)**

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.

**2. Romans 1:26-27 (my literal translation)**

For this reason God handed them over to degrading passions. For their females exchanged the natural (*phusikēn*) usage for that which is apart from nature (*para phusin*). And in the same way also the males, giving up the natural (*phusikēn*) usage of the female, were consumed with desire for one another, males (*arsenes*) committing shameless acts with males and receiving in their own selves the due penalty for their error.

**3. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10**

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes (*malakoi*), sodomites (*arsenokoitai*), thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

**4. Plutarch *Dialogue on Love* 750**

[late 1st - early 2nd c. CE. The *Dialogue* has as its occasion the situation of a young man Bacchon torn between the woman who wants to marry him and his two adult male lovers, Protogenes and Anthemion)

“Why, of course,” said Protogenes, “since it is necessary for producing children, there is no harm in legislators talking it up and singing its praises to the masses. But genuine Love has no connection whatsoever with the women’s quarters. . . . If, however, such a passion must also be called Love, let it at least be qualified as an effeminate and bastard love that takes its exercise in the women’s quarters. . . . There is only one genuine Love, the love of boys. . . . You will see it in the schools of philosophy, or perhaps in the gymnasia and palaestrae, searching for young men whom it cheers on with a clear and noble cry to the pursuit of virtue when they are found worthy of its attention. But that other lax and housebound love, that spends its time in the bosoms and beds of women, ever pursuing a soft life, enervated amid pleasure devoid of manliness and friendship and inspiration—it should be proscribed. . . . For this reason also it is not gentlemanly or urbane to make love to slave boys; such a love is mere copulation, like the love of women.”

5. **Plato *Symposium* 181**

“Now the Love that belongs to the popular Aphrodite . . . is the Love we see in the meaner sort of men; who, in the first place, love women as well as boys; secondly, where they love, they are set on the body more than the soul. . . . But the other Love springs from the Heavenly goddess who . . . partakes not of the female but only of the male. Wherefore those who are inspired by this Love betake them to the male, in fondness for what has the robuster nature and a larger share of mind. Even in the passion for boys you may note the way of those who are under the single incitement of this Love: they love boys only when they begin to acquire some mind—a growth associated with that of down on their chins. For I conceive that those who begin to love them at this age are prepared to be always with them and share all with them as long as love shall last. They will not take advantage of a boy’s green thoughtlessness to deceive him and make a mock of him by running straight off to another. . . . These [i.e., those who do take such advantage] are the persons responsible for the scandal which prompts some to say it is a shame to gratify one’s lover . . .”

6. **Philo *Special Laws* 3.37-42**

“Much graver than the above is another evil, which has ramped its way into the cities, namely pederasty. In former days the very mention of it was a great disgrace, but now it is a matter of boasting, not only to the active but to the passive partners, who habituate themselves to endure the disease of effemination, let both body and soul run to waste, and leave no ember of their male sex-nature to smoulder. . . . [The active partner] pursues an unnatural (*para phusin*) pleasure and does his best to render cities desolate and uninhabited by destroying the means of procreation. Furthermore he sees no harm in becoming a tutor and instructor in the grievous vices of unmanliness and effeminacy (*malakia*) . . .

7. **Philo *On Abraham* 135-137**

“Incapable of bearing such satiety, plunging like cattle, they threw off from their necks the law of nature and applied themselves to deep drinking of strong liquor and dainty feeding and forbidden forms of intercourse. Not only in their mad lust for women did they violate the marriages of their neighbours, but also men mounted males without respect for the sex nature which the active partner shares with the passive. . . . Then, as little by little they accustomed those who were by nature men to submit to play the part of women, they saddled them with the formidable curse of a female disease. For not only did they emasculate their bodies through softness (*malakotēs*) and debauchery but they worked a further degeneration in their souls.”

8. **Plato *Laws* 636C**

“When male unites with female for procreation, the pleasure experienced is held to be in accordance with nature (*kata phusin*), but contrary to nature (*para phusin*) when male mates with male or female with female.”

9. **Josephus *Against Apion* 199**

“The Law recognizes no sexual connections, except the natural (*kata phusin*) union of man and woman, and that only for the procreation of children. Sodomy [lit. the intercourse of males with males] it abhors, and punishes any guilty of such with death.”

10. **Josephus *Against Apion* 275**

“[T]he Greeks . . . actually attributed to the gods the practice of sodomy [lit. intercourse with males] . . . thus inventing an excuse for the monstrous and unnatural (*para phusin*) pleasures in which they themselves indulged.”

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