

God Is Not A Homophobe

**An Unbiased Look at
Homosexuality in the Bible**

By

Philo Thelos

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FOREWORD

"the ministry of death"

Let's revisit some of the more sordid history of the church. In fact, let's go back to the few years just prior to the birth of the church, to look at the horror of legalistic mind-sets, and what the apostle Paul calls *"the ministry of death,"* (2 Cor. 3:7).

Religious determinism has been responsible for the most shocking crimes in history. Without question the Jewish Scribes, Pharisees and Lawyers of the first century believed with all their hearts that Jesus Christ was an imposter. They fought Him bitterly throughout His short ministry and eventually persuaded the Roman governor, Pilate, to crucify Him.

These same religious leaders later began to imprison the followers of Christ, and eventually began murdering them just as they had murdered their master. The history books chronicle years of brutal persecution of Christians by the Jews first, then by the Roman leaders who believed Jewish lies about the followers of Jesus.

After the church gained power and influence, the church began its own bitter history of horror. In the name of Jesus Christ and righteousness, the church conducted her Inquisitions and Crusades, during which multiplied thousands of innocent people were imprisoned or murdered.

The church persecuted the Great Reformers, killed Bible translators, and imprisoned "rebels" and "heretics" like Martin Luther.

The church was the moving force behind the imprisonment, torture and murder of thousands of "witches" during the infamous "Salem Witch Trials."

During the American Civil War, the church took the side of the slave-owners, arguing from the Bible that black skin was a mark of God's curse on Cain and Ham, and that enslavement of black people was in perfect accord with Scripture.

Later, the church was on the side of the segregationists, arguing that black people are inferior, and they must not be allowed equal place with "white people" in society and the church because to do so was to fight against God's "curse" upon their race.

While Germany carried out wholesale slaughter of the Jews, subjecting them to incomprehensible suffering and genocide, the church was silent, claiming that Scripture demands that "the powers that be are ordained of God..." Very sincere Christians became accessories to the murder of thousands of Jews, by revealing their hiding places, on the premise that the Bible condemns "all liars."

Women have been relegated to the background of the church, forced into virtual silence, and made to serve the interests of male church leaders. The church has rejected the spirituality and spiritual gifts of women, and refused them their rightful place in Christ's Kingdom.

In every case, the crimes noted above have been perpetrated and carried out by people whose conviction cannot be questioned. They believed that they were "right," and that their cause was "according to truth." They all appealed to the Bible for support. They used the Bible vigorously in debate with their opposition.

Yet in every case the church and the world has come to understand that the church was wrong. We now confess our spiritual stupidity in every one of the above cases. Oh, a few minor "rebel groups" still hold onto the false notions of an ignorant church. They are like the political groups that build encampments in the deep woods and conduct training exercises in hopes that someday they will be able to rise up and overthrow the corrupt American Government.

But the history of the church proves how deadly is the notion that Biblical Authority is the ultimate goal of religion. Those churches that place greatest emphasis on "Book, Chapter and Verse" are the ones most noticeably hostile to any ideas but their own. And they are the ones who rise up in violent antagonism that leads to the death of spiritual relationships, social relations, and sometimes even physical death. In the name of spiritual rectitude and under the banner of Jesus Christ, the church has been on the side of repression, evil and murder more often than it has been on the side of right. She has been forced to "repent" time and again.

In our day the church is still hard at work in her death dealing business. Now the church is the chief voice suppressing the rights of homosexuals to lead a quiet and peaceful life, with all the benefits that come automatically to heterosexually inclined people. Without question the church believe she is right. Church leaders

will preach from the Bible as long as anyone will listen, that "homosexuality is abominable to God, and will lead you straight to Hell." They are absolutely convinced they are right. They have their verses memorized and their arguments well honed. But:

So did those who led the Inquisitions and Crusades.
So did those who tried to silence the Reformers.
So did those who demanded the murder of "witches" in Salem.
So did those who argued for slavery.
So did those who worked hand in hand with segregationists.
So did those who betrayed Jews to Gestapo murderers.
So do those who demand, "women keep silent in the church."

In light of the church's penchant for taking the wrong position on social issues, we think it is not out of order to suggest that the church's present position relative to homosexuality is one that will eventually require "repentance," just as in these other cases. The church is already awakening to the fact that the arguments she thought were set in stone are actually sitting on quite sandy soil.

Eventually even the hardest shell will crack under increasing pressure. Many church leaders have good hearts, even though their hearts are overgrown with much tradition and false theology. Their good hearts will gradually receive the true light of God's word until finally the darkness is ultimately dispelled, and they realize that they have been as stupidly misguided on the homosexual issue as their forbears were misguided on all the previously issues.

No one can honestly admit one's fallibility without holding all one's convictions with loose fingers. The pursuit of truth brings frequent change. We believe that the day is approaching when the church will abandon her official hatred of homosexuality just as she has abandoned her positions on so many other matters. This book is one pastor's contribution to the search for light on a terribly and unfortunately dark issue. May God help us to lay down all preconceptions and to simply allow Scripture to speak what it will. The truth we find will surely set us free from all the shame and hurt we have for so long inflicted upon undeserving people.

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Introduction

Truth is not always as easy to discover as we wish it to be. In matters of conscience and spirituality it seems especially difficult at times to form precise and confident convictions. Religious people are especially concerned to found their convictions on solid, defensible grounds. Christians believe all spiritual and moral truth to be grounded in the Hebrew/Christian Bible. I am a Christian. For nearly forty years I have been a full-time minister, teaching what I believed to be the solidly provable tenets of Biblical truth. Along the way I have discovered, more than once, that my convictions were ill founded and, after thorough study, integrity required change. The volume you hold in your hand is the product of one such change.

As is the case with all Christians, my spiritual walk began with several "built-in" convictions, all of them derived from my family, friends and church leaders. As most of us do, I took for granted what came from those sources, never having a thought that any of them might possibly be wrong. But personal study frequently cast shadows on ideas I once thought were established in perfect light. Like everyone else raised in the church I was taught that any form of sexuality apart from heterosexual intercourse in the missionary position was sinful. Masturbation for example, was considered a "shameful" act that must be kept strictly secret by one who practiced it. Oral sex was an outrageous "perversion." To become sexually stimulated at the sight of a girl or woman in abbreviated attire was sinful "lust."

My heritage taught me that one of the most hideous "perversions" possible to humans was any form of homosexuality. I learned to despise homosexuality and to have nothing but contempt for anyone who practiced it. Like white people toward blacks a generation ago, it was a matter of pride and the "American way" to hate "queers and faggots." I preached and taught publicly against homosexuality all the years of my public ministry, believing with all my heart that I was "right" and could not possibly be wrong on this issue. I sat with pastoral peers in discussions about "how to stem the tide" of homosexuality in society and how to keep it out of the church. AIDS, we thought, was surely God's judgment against this "abominable" lifestyle, and America was

certain to reap God's judgment if our leaders did not find a way to stamp out this deadly "homosexual scourge."

But something most disconcerting happened in my continuing search for truth. While studying through the Bible for its answers to basic sexual issues and problems, the few existing Biblical references to homosexuality called for the same intensive evaluation that I was trying to apply to such issues as polygamy, concubinage, prostitution, masturbation, adultery, etc. What I learned about these few texts was startling and unsettling in the extreme. What I had accepted without question, I found was simply not true. From the Old Testament references to Sodom and Gomorrah to Paul's New Testament letters to Rome and Corinth, I discovered, to my personal dismay, that "*what I had heard from the ancient ones,*" (cf. Matt. 5:21 etc.), was not contained in those references at all. After subjecting every text to comprehensive re-evaluation, I knew that what I had been taught and what I had therefore simply passed along in my own teaching, was wrong. Integrity again demanded change. This volume is the record of personal study that led me to that change.

I write this volume for the sake of Christians who might be disposed to examine how they consider, and how they treat fellow humans in regard to differences in sexual orientation. This is a reference point, offering a variant point of view from one who was on the "other side of the fence" and who must now confess his error, and publicly record his repentance.

This volume is also offered to those who do not embrace Christianity, but whose lifestyle has been severely condemned by Christians. My appeal is that those who have been thus attacked, might attempt to understand that rank and file Christians are not just naturally disposed to be haughty, unmerciful, opinionated and judgmental. They sincerely believe that what they have been told is true. They genuinely fear that homosexuality will damn their society and that they must speak and act publicly against it. I would encourage non-Christian readers to exercise more self-control, mercy and love than most Christians are able to exercise on this subject. More importantly, I offer this volume to both Christian and non-Christian homosexuals as a reference point for answering the faulty arguments of sincere but misguided church people. Especially do I hope to provide Christian homosexuals something

with which to ease their conscience and help them live in peace with their homosexuality.

Because this volume is offered in hopes that Christians will read it, it seems necessary to devote several pages to a discussion of what true Bible study is. If *all* Christians, and especially their church *leaders*, actually *studied* the Bible rather than reading it cursorily, the church would not be so severely divided on so many trivial issues, and society would not have suffered unjustly at Christian hands on so many issues. There are two great problems with Bible study: [1. As the Bible says, "*much study is a weariness to the flesh*," (Ecc. 12:12), and not many Christians are willing to do the hard work necessary to learn truth for themselves. It is much simpler to just take the word of a preacher. [2. Very few Christians know how to study. Very few even know what *tools* exist for in-depth study. Many church leaders, including professional preachers and pastors, don't know what tools exist, and do not know how to use them. For them too, it is simpler to just take the word of their peers, or to use someone else's sermon outlines.

Part One of this volume is offered in hopes that some will use this information to begin developing personal study habits that will uncover truth rather than perpetuate hearsay, ignorance and error. This segment will reveal the method of Bible study that led to my personal changes on the subject of homosexuality as it previously led to changes on several other fundamental issues. Anyone can discover truth for oneself. No one need be dependent on the word of someone else. And when our convictions become the basis for how we treat other humans, we dare not simply act on someone else's word.

So, reader, I do not call upon you to simply take my word for what is contained herein. Examine the Bible text for yourself. Supplementary and helpful insights can be gleaned from other writers, thus I have included a selected bibliography. But after all is said and done, everything rests on what you personally determine that the Bible says about homosexuality. Read and think. Study hard and pray for insight. Truth is difficult to derive at times. But the effort always pays rich reward. Only the truth makes us free people. How valuable is freedom to you?

PART ONE UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

HOW CAN I KNOW WHAT THE BIBLE REALLY SAYS?

One cannot be in the church long and listen to many conversations, sermons or teachings that appeal to the Bible for authority, without realizing that the Bible is vigorously employed by opposing parties to any religious debate, each believing that Scripture proves the validity of their ideas. Rational people realize that it is preposterous to think that the Bible can be *fairly* interpreted in a way that sustains opposite viewpoints. Any two opposing parties may both be wrong in their appeal to Scripture, or only one of them may be right, but both cannot possibly be right. The Bible is sordidly misused and abused by many people in order to make its statements fit the ideas they desire to promote. This is not an accusation that such abuse of Scripture is *intentional*. It is simply an observation of reality. Humans are so psychologically disposed and emotionally compelled to be “right” that they will go to great lengths to prove their ideas and justify their behavior. Often, because of human fallibility plus the incredible difficulty of being truly objective, arguments and defenses are offered that fall far short of both credibility and integrity. In this milieu the Bible is often used in ways that are totally inappropriate to any standards of honest scholarship. If we do, as we should, grant to all Bible students their integrity and sincere desire to know Biblical *truth* versus theory and human tradition, we must nevertheless suggest to all students that simply appealing to “what the Bible says” is never an end-all to argumentation. Simply put, no human is able to rise *perfectly* above the host of subjective factors that color everything we think and do. No human can read the Bible through purely objective eyes. All attempts to discover “what the Bible says” and to defend one’s ethical or theological position on that principle, without at the same time admitting one’s personal, subjective contingencies, is spiritual elitism. That spirit drove first century Phariseeism and it remains the driving force of all modern legalism. No human dare approach a study of or argument from the Bible, believing himself to be infallible. Yet as soon as one admits fallibility, one opens the door to the possibility that one’s very best efforts may still not have produced unquestionable truth. Though difficult to do, we must all face every Biblical discussion on

every topic, with the thought in the back of our mind that the other viewpoint may be right. Augustine said "Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the Divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor, does not understand it at all," (Christian Doctrine 1.35.40).

This statement is true. Any interpretation of Scripture that creates hurt, oppression, or destruction of any kind to people's well being, is a wrong interpretation regardless of how long standing the interpretation, or how traditionally, historically or exegetically respectable it is. There can be no debate about the historical fact that the church's historically established, authoritative stance on such issues as race, gender, slavery, and "orthodoxy" has accounted for the persecution and death of many thousands of people over the last millennium and a half. Traditional interpretation has prohibited women from enjoying their rightful privileges and freedom under Christ to equal social standing, job equality, church ministry – in short the very things that accompany true, full standing in the human community. Church dogma defended slavery even in the midst of the Civil war. Racial bias still exists in the church, though admittedly to a lesser degree than was true in past generations. And who can ever forget, or even attempt to mollify the horrific tragedy of the Inquisition? Of the murder of innocent people during the Salem witch trials? Of the imprisonment and persecution of great spiritual Reformers like Martin Luther? Of the murders of hundreds of people at different points in history for their disagreement with prevailing church orthodoxy, including several whose great "crime" was simply to translate the Bible into the language of the common man and make it available to the public?

Should it turn out that the church's stance on homosexuality and other sexual issues has been as wrong as its error on so many other issues, the church has committed more crimes against humanity than it can possibly account for in the day of Christ's Judgment. Surely the church believes she is right in her blanket condemnation of homosexuality. But she was just as surely convinced of her infallibility on the issues mentioned above, all of which have required repentance by the church. Can the church *prove beyond reasonable doubt* that same-sex relationships damage either those involved in them, or any others? Is it even *minutely*

possible that there are some aspects of the same-sex debate that merit deeper inspection? Is the Biblical material on this issue so transparently clear that we cannot possibly be mistaken in absolutely condemning all same-sex relationships? Does the Bible justify the social and spiritual excommunication of a large percentage of the world's population on the sole basis of their sexual orientation? Is there "love" within our hearts for the homosexual? If so, how do we express that love to them while demanding their exile from the mainstream of both society and the church?

The bottom line of Biblical studies is this: What will "build the double love of God and of our neighbor?" The final fruit of all appeals to the Bible for authority must be the fruit of "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control,*" (Gal. 5:22, 23). These all pass the supreme test of love which is the foundation of all God's laws. When we ask, "What is the loving thing to do?" Scripture answers: "*Do no harm to your neighbor, for this fulfills all law,*" (Rom. 13:10). On the other hand we can know that our *understanding* is wrong and our *behavior* toward others is wrong, if it produces the fruit of "*enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envyings, drunkenness, carousings and such like,*" (Gal.5:20, 21). We must make every effort to understand these hurtful behaviors so that we do not either dishonor God or harm others by our faulty convictions. There must *always* be in the Bible student's mind the possibility that the prevailing interpretation of the Bible may not have taken into account important pieces of data. This is not egotistical. It is an attitude necessary to fruitful study of the Bible. One who does not suspect that something new may be found has no reason to study. Such a person can logically do only one thing; accept the present results of other Bible scholars and search no more. But of course, this requires that one's conscience rest upon the correct interpretation of Scripture by others. It avoids personal responsibility to study and determine for oneself what one believes and chooses to practice. This responsibility, stated Biblically, is "*Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind,*" and "*The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God,*" (Rom. 14:5, 22, NAS). On this principle then, all *legitimate* study proceeds on the presumption that there is more to find than has been found. The phrase "Bible student" implies a person who explores the Bible

with the expectation of finding what has not yet been seen or, at least, has not yet been made clear.

Most of the problems in the church derive from its leaders. And the most glaring problem observable in church leaders is their *unwillingness* and/or *inability* to measure their concepts and formulate their doctrine by the strict, objective standard of Holy Scripture. Leaders are pressured to give their church members the impression that, "I am right, you can trust me" and "our church is right, don't look elsewhere." Without intending to do so, church leaders often search the Scripture for "proof texts" that will support their already settled conclusions. But the only honest way to study the Bible is to read it, as much as possible, with absolute commitment to accept its *demonstrable* meaning, however much that meaning may cancel previously held convictions. Following that path is risky and potentially costly. We understand the pain and the difficulty of such honesty and objectivity in Bible study. Perhaps the reader will allow us a few lines of reflection on our personal journey down this path.

We (husband and wife) both were born into a hard line, right wing, negatively oriented, legalistic denomination. For generations our families had been members of this denomination. As we grew up we were taught, at home and from the pulpit, that all other churches and all their members were wrong and hell-bound. We could not leave "our" church and go to another without losing our salvation. I knew early on that I wanted to preach the Word of God. I admired preachers. I listened to and learned their ideas and grew adept at using their style of argumentation. In the process I absorbed their sectarian, legalistic spirit and became adept also at "using" the Bible the way they did to sustain the "rightness" of our denominational peculiarities. I began full time ministry when I was 22 and began then to associate with older preachers in a more intimate way. I was amazed to hear some of them joke among themselves about getting their Sunday sermons by "tearing one out," a phrase that referred to simply copying and preaching another preacher's sermon outline "as is." Such sermon copying was done strictly within the confines of the writings of their peers and their own denominational writers, and the average church member still does not know that this was and is a regular practice of their preachers. Something in me rebelled at this practice. Two pieces of advice in the infancy of my ministry set the future course

of my approach to Bible study and preaching. In my first year of ministry one preacher whom I admired told me, "Most of the people in your church have been Christians longer than you have even been alive. You will have to study like mad just to stay ahead of the hounds." I took that advice seriously. I learned to use the necessary tools for scholarly Biblical exegesis and research, and for 36 years I have immersed myself in as thorough Bible study as I know how to perform. In my second year of ministry a visiting preacher came to preach a week at the church I was pastoring. His messages were always responded to with statements such as: "that was refreshing...different...new..." etc. Some of the things he taught I had never heard. While visiting personally and intimately with him during that week, I pumped him for information about Bible study tools and methodology. He made one statement that proved to be the salvation of my spiritual life and of my ministry. He said, "The best thing you can do for yourself and for your church, is to learn to preach expositively. Be honest with what you find, preach it courageously, and be willing to accept the consequences." That statement struck a chord in my heart and I began to learn to study and to preach expositively (i.e. taking the text apart, piece by piece, examining it thoroughly, in context, and accepting the meaning required by this process).

Over the next 18 years I studied and preached through much of the OT and almost all of the NT, verse by verse. As I began to become somewhat proficient at the art, I began to hear statements from my church members, such as "that was refreshing... different...new..." etc.! I was being asked every year to travel to more and more places to preach a week at a time at other churches. I began writing, and was soon asked to contribute to brotherhood journals, which I did gladly. But the method of studying "verse by verse" and in *context*, so necessary to expository preaching, produced some unexpected problems. I was seeing many things in a different light than what was accepted as the norm within our denomination. Because I began more and more to preach these ideas that were outside the mainstream of our denominational mindset, my "popularity ride" began to get bumpy and the longer it continued the bumpier it got. Two things proved to be my "fall from grace" with that denomination, and in my home church.

Firstly, when I preached at other churches, the local preacher often questioned me, sometimes edgily, by about some of my "new

ideas.” Some of my contributions to brotherhood journals brought negative response from brethren in different places across the country. I found that I was often in conflict with my peers because of some of the things I believed and preached. Yet I did truly believe in what I was preaching and so I continued to preach my convictions, heedless of the consequences. Remarkably, though I was becoming more and more a center of controversy among preachers, the lay members received me readily and my popularity at home and as a traveling preacher grew.

Secondly, the product of my expositional study was a steadily growing pile of concepts that did not “fit” with what I had previously heard and simply accepted as truth on the basis of my confidence in those who taught me. I awoke to the realization that in order to “prove” my denominational party line I had been following the example of my peers in twisting the true meaning of some Bible verses, ignoring the true definition of some Bible words and ignoring the historical, contextual, cultural setting of many verses. Without intending to do so I had used the Scriptures for my own sectarian purposes, “finding” in them what I needed to find even when it was not truly there. I discovered to my absolute dismay and heart-sickness that I had become just like the Pharisees with whom Jesus struggled. Eventually the pile of inconsistencies became a mountain and I could no longer simply disregard the reality that something was dreadfully and fundamentally wrong with my spiritual and professional posture. To the best of my ability I had been honest in my study and believed completely in the truths I had uncovered. But many of those truths were in direct conflict with the foundation stones of my denomination. I found that I could no longer preach the “party line” with integrity. So I began to preach things that directly challenged the doctrinal peculiarities of our denomination. As a consequence I was eventually fired from a church I had pastored for 13 years. A year later my wife and I left the denomination of our birth to enter the mainstream of Christianity. This departure put me in a denominational no-man’s land, having no allegiance to any group, and for the first time in my life totally free from any pressure to make my ideas fit with those of someone else. I made a decision to conduct a hard-nosed re-examination of every doctrine I had ever held dear. I was determined to decide for myself what was *really* – and *provably* – true about all spiritual matters. Both my wife and I

have pursued this re-examination together and have learned amazing things about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church and ourselves. We learned truths that would forever have remained hidden to us if we had not been willing to simply take what the Scriptures honestly say and embrace those things without fear of the consequences. But there is a correct methodology for this process and this methodology is the subject of this study.

How do we remove the blinders of ideological pre-conditioning that each of us brings to Scripture? The barest minimum of necessary components of objective Bible study will include:

1. The text itself: the actual words and phrases as defined by authoritative scholarship. No text of Scripture can possibly be “understood” without brutal honesty as to exact meaning of words and phrases. Every word must be understood as nearly as possible, in exactly the way the writer and original audience understood that word.
2. The historical situation of the text. Serious Bible study includes study of the times, places, cultural/political situation and events surrounding both the people *doing* the writing, and the people *receiving* the writing.
3. Interpretation of the text in light of its historical situation. True understanding of the Biblical text sees the words and phrases as applied specifically to the times, places, cultural/political situation and events surrounding writer and recipients. The words of Scripture cannot be treated as if they arose in a vacuum. All Biblical text is time, history and culture bound. Ignoring this fact or devaluing its importance spells doom for serious Bible study.

The Biblical text does not come to us in the form of timeless axioms. Every text was composed in a specific time/space framework. Thus Biblical writers do not generally attempt to explain what for them and their readers were common assumptions. Use of certain words, phrases and references was simply taken for granted because the writer knew the original readers would understand. The only way for us to likewise understand is to put ourselves in that original situation, as nearly as possible, through diligent historical study.

Our greatest problem is that we tend to read the Biblical text in light of our own modern historical/cultural situation. For

example, when some read references to the “naturalness” of long hair on women and “shamefulness” of long hair on men, (1 Cor. 10), their conclusions show their confusion, and churches arise that require women to have a “veil” on their head when they enter the sanctuary. Likewise some misunderstand the point of the “foot-washing” episode of Jn. 13, with the result that they believe Jesus to be commanding that we go about literally washing each other’s feet, (as per vs. 12-15). Others will misunderstand Mk. 16:18 as Jesus’ “Great Commission” to build churches that specialize in drinking poison and handling poisonous snakes.

Giving full consideration to the historical situation in which the text originates will enable us to understand it as it’s original readers and authors understood it. This rule is especially important when studying the New Testament. The cultural environment of first century Palestine and surrounding areas was extremely complex. The New Testament writers were primarily Jewish but their audience was primarily Gentile. The original church was comprised entirely of Jews with a long history of commitment to Jehovah and His law-word. But the church very quickly became dominated by Gentile converts, whose long history was one of pagan idolatry. Though their mutual language was the Greek of the common man, their thought processes were entirely different. To understand what Paul wrote to the Roman Christians for example, requires one to understand more than the Hebrew concept of things, simply because the Gentile Roman Christians did not think like the Hebrew Christians. To understand New Testament writings, one must learn something about who the people were and why and how they did things. One must get in touch with the first-century world and learn to see things as first-century people saw them. Until one does the hard work necessary for such study, one is not qualified to either form or state an emphatic opinion about “what the Bible says.”

Jesus said “*you shall know the truth and the truth will make you free,*” (Jn.8:32). The “*truth*” that frees us is “*My word,*” which is God’s word, (Jn. 8:3; 17:17). Any doctrine, idea or practice other than what is genuinely *true*, makes us slaves. The difficulty we each face is in arriving at *truth*. By that we mean the *actual meaning* of the original writings, as opposed to the mountain of human opinion under which that truth has been buried. We struggle against subjectivity, ignorance, predisposition, prejudice, peer influence,

family ties, fear, etc. The path to truth, though difficult to *follow*, is nonetheless easily *pointed* to: Honesty, Thoroughness and Objectivity in Bible study.

The objective of Bible study is to find the “plain sense” of its statements. “Just take it for what it says” is an oft-repeated refrain. Interestingly, every competing denominational “camp” uses the same phrase, each claiming to be the only ones who take the Bible “simply for what it says,” understanding its “plain sense,” while frequently occupying opposite sides of a doctrinal fence. Obviously, two opposing viewpoints cannot both be founded on the “plain sense” of Biblical statements. At least one, and perhaps both viewpoints are wrong. So how does one *truly arrive* at the “plain sense” of Scripture? We can confidently “take the Bible for what it says” but only if we can be sure we are truly reading exactly what it says! Finding truth is possible. It requires hard work. It requires honesty and spiritual integrity. We must be prepared to admit that exegesis without presuppositions is impossible. Then we must be willing to determinedly lay aside all presuppositions we find to be in conflict with what the Word actually says. The great “victory” we wish to win in this arena is victory over presupposition and traditional, though erroneous, conclusions.

When we study Biblical statements containing commandments, condemnation, censure, etc, we must delay making final conclusions about the meaning and application of what we read until we have asked and answered some fundamental questions. The basic questions one must answer, are these:

What, *Exactly*, Are The Authors *Against*; What Are They *For*?

When Bible authors condemn and oppose something, *what exactly* are the writers opposing? Quite often the real point of opposition does not lie easily and fully exposed upon the surface of the text. What are they against when, for example, they oppose “adultery,” “homosexuality,” or “fornication?” What *precisely* is the definition of the word we are looking at? Are the authors *always* against this thing, in any of its expressions, or is their opposition related to specific cultural, social or religious circumstances? These are the very first questions that should be asked and answered. One

cannot be honest with self or others regarding such issues, unless one is positive (s)he understands what the Biblical author means by using such words. Simply because an English translation uses any of those words does not automatically mean that our English word exactly represents the original intent of an author who used either a Greek or Hebrew word. If one wants to know the meaning of a prohibition, one must first determine *exactly what it is* the author of the prohibition is against, and whether his prohibition might be altered by changes in social, cultural or cultic conditions.

Commonly used words frequently suffer from our assumptions that, "everyone knows what that means." It is too easy to simply take for granted that the commonly accepted meaning of a word is the *correct* meaning. It is amazing to find that, in sex-related matters, the original Biblical authors used a large number of Greek/Hebrew words that meant to them something different than what the supposed English equivalents mean to us. Biblical sexual ethics can never be understood if we do not even understand the words used by the original authors. And we will never understand those words unless we proceed on the assumption that every word must be defined according to the best modern scholarship. An absolute rule of thumb is this: *Never assume you know what a Bible word means until you have examined it for yourself.* We say it straightforwardly: *Never allow your understanding of Scripture to hang solely on the authoritative declaration of your favorite preacher. If truth is actually vital to you, do your own study.*

As an interesting example of how easily mistakes are made in this area, consider the word "leprosy." All Bible readers know that in the writings of both OT and NT "leprosy" was a dreaded disease and especially rendered its victim spiritually and physically "unclean." But is that disease the same thing we call "leprosy" today? No, it is not. Today the word "leprosy" refers to Hansen's disease. That our present day "leprosy" (Hansen's disease) cannot be the same as what we read of in the Bible is demonstrable by the facts that [1. Hansen's disease has no cure, while Biblical leprosy could be cured and specific rituals were given for cured lepers to be received back into temple fellowship. [2. Biblical "leprosy," unlike Hansen's disease, could infect physical objects such as furniture, stones, etc. Thus in Biblical culture one might find a house infected with "leprosy." Detailed procedures are given for "curing" the house of this disease. What this illustrates is the fact that what we

mean by an English word today is not necessarily what the Bible writers meant when they wrote the Greek or Hebrew word which is the source for our English word.

Therefore we must be extremely careful that we do not *assume* that when the word “adultery” appears in the Bible, it represents our modern concept of “adultery.” The same is true when we read the words “fornication,” “prostitute,” “homosexual” and a host of other words, both sexual and non-sexual. It is the most serious violation of any scholarly standard to *assume without inspection*, thus without evidence, that what an ancient author opposes is the same phenomenon existing in our time. All honest Bible believers are obligated to treat the Bible’s statements with as much personal integrity as possible. We are all obligated to use the Bible in such a way that we do not violate its integrity. Vast numbers of scholarly tools exist for such study, as well as guides for correctly using those tools. Entire college courses exist to teach and train students to use the available resources for scholarly Bible study. One simply has no excuse for shoddy Bible study. The scholarly methodology for effective Bible study is straightforward.

What Is The True Meaning Of The Original Words?

This is the first question to answer. The “plain meaning of the words” is not automatically derived from a cursory reading. The Bible reader must be sure (s)he understands the true *definition* of the words encountered, as well as the *import* of those words. A good Biblical example of this is found in Jn. 21:21-23. Peter asks Jesus about John’s future, and Jesus replies, “*If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me.*” Those who heard this statement *interpreted* it to *mean* that John would not die, and they circulated that report among themselves. “*Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die; but only, ‘If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?’*” Without a doubt, the disciples heard the *exact words* of Jesus but they *interpreted* them wrongly, missing the “plain sense” of what He said, and so circulated a false report. The church is full of exactly this kind of mis-interpretation. When we read the Bible it must filter through everything we are and all we have been taught all our lives. It must filter through the formidable mass of our cultural baggage and psychological dispositions. Thus we often

have difficulties understanding the “plain sense” of Scripture. For example:

“Flesh” in Rom. 13:14 and other verses, does not refer to the physical body but to man’s sinful nature. So it is not a sign of holiness that we despise our physical bodies as many have done, based on such negative Biblical references to “flesh.” It is foolhardy and spiritually senseless for people, however sincere they be, to refuse to eat good food, or to wear comfortable clothing, or even to actively hurt themselves physically, believing such actions are necessary in order to “*make no provision for the flesh...*”

On the basis of “the literal reading” of 1 Cor. 14:34, 35, many churches deny ministry for women while at the same time rejecting modern usage of “tongues” and “prophecy” which the “literal reading” of the same context requires! So what did Paul mean when he wrote, “*women keep silence,*” to the Corinthians? What did the *Corinthians* understand him to say?

Others take “literally” the requirement of Paul that women in church meetings wear a head covering, (1 Cor. 11). The verses surrounding that requirement make it specifically applicable to women who “*pray and prophesy.*” Yet most of the “literalists” who require the head covering refuse to allow women to pray and prophesy in the church!!!

Mormons “baptize for the dead” as per the “plain sense” of 1 Cor. 15:29. The Christian community correctly rejects the Mormon interpretation of those verses and refuses to baptize “for the dead.” But *why* is the church *right* to reject this practice? What did Paul actually mean when he used those words?

Should we not all, based on the “literal reading” of Mk. 16:18, “*handle snakes and drink poison?*” Why not?

The “plain sense” of Jn. 13:14,15 is the basis of some churches having “foot washing” services. All “mainline” Christian churches reject this understanding of those verses. Who is *right*? And *why*? If we reject foot washing for today’s church, then what did Jesus mean when he said, “*you should do as I did to you?*”

Can we follow Jesus if we do not “*sell all we have and give to the poor,*” (Mk. 10:21)? Since this is a *command* directly from the mouth of Jesus, why is it not mandatory for all of us? Even though He spoke to an individual, was He not establishing the

principle for a communist society? Doesn't the example of the disciples selling their property and bringing it to the Apostles for distribution to the poor, (Acts 4:32-37), reinforce the mandate for the church being communistic? Why not? What do Jesus' words *mean to us*? How do we *interpret* the action of those selfless saints?

Many translations exist giving different translations for the same words. Which is right? For example, is it "prevent," (KJV) or "precede," (NASB & others), in 1 Thess. 4:15?

When Paul wrote "*malakos*," (1 Cor. 6:9), did he mean "weaklings," (Tyndale and others), "effeminate," (KJV, ASV), "sodomite," (NAB), "male prostitute," (NIV, NRSV) or "perversion," (RSV, TEV, NEB)? Forget what we *think and what we have been told*! We must *know: what did Paul mean*? What did the Corinthians understand him to say?

When Paul wrote "*arsenokoites*," (1 Cor. 6:9), did he mean "lechery," (Wyclif, 14th century), "abusers of themselves with mankind," (KJV), "liars with mankind," (many translations prior to 20th century), "homosexuals," (NASB, NLT), "homosexual offenders," (NIV), "sodomite," "men who have sexual relations with other men," (NCV), "sexual perverts," "male homosexuals" or "practicing homosexuals," (other modern translations)? Which is it? Does the word Paul used really *mean* something sexual that men do "with other men?" Does it *mean* the same thing as our modern word, "homosexual?" What did Paul *mean*, and what did his original readers *understand* him to say?

All these different translations cannot be correct. Which *one*, if *any* is correct? How can we know what Paul was against if we do not know the meaning of the words he used? Such differing translations compel any serious student to simply lay them all aside and pursue an independent study of all available scholarly resources, to find, as near as possible, *Paul's original meaning*.

Jesus' "literal words" were "*it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye...*" (Mk. 10:24,25). Many interpret these words as a reference to "a gate in Jerusalem called 'the needle's eye' through which a camel could crawl if it had been unburdened..." This "interpretation" makes it *possible* for a camel to go through a needle's eye. Yet Jesus' *intended meaning*

in these words was that it is *impossible* for one who trusts riches to go to Heaven, (vs. 27)! So why would Jesus begin to make such an emphatic point, only to destroy its force with His illustration?!?! The thorough researcher will discover that *there never was* such a gate in Jerusalem. The first mention of such is in a commentary by Theophylact, in the 11th century. It was his *invention*, to try to “explain” this difficult Scripture. Jesus *meant* this: It takes a miracle for a camel to go through a needle’s eye and it takes a miracle for a rich man to be saved. But *understanding* this requires more than a *cursory* reading. And it requires the ability to reject “gimmicky” explanations of difficult Scriptures.

The answer to such difficulties and differences of interpretation is not “just read without interpreting,” or “just take it literally.” The answer is to interpret *fairly* and *correctly*, considering *all available evidence*. *Exegesis* is careful, systematic, independent study of Scripture in order to find its *original, intended* meaning. Exegetical study requires us to read with the thought: “what did this mean *back then*, and *back there*.”

So the first general principle of finding Bible truth is this: Interpret according to the correct, i.e. *original* meaning of the words. If we do not understand the words used, we *cannot* understand the message of the Bible.

Consider also that an *isolated* word is not always clear: What do you think of if you read the word “trunk?” Does it refer to an elephant’s trunk, a large container, the baggage compartment of an automobile or the base of a tree? If the word is “light,” does it refer to an electrical bulb, to some food that is low in calories, or to an object that is not “heavy?” If the word is “desert,” does it mean “to abandon” or “a sweet treat?” In Rev. 5:5, “lion” refers to Christ, but in 1 Pet. 5:8 it refers to Satan. Does it mean the same in *both* places?

Correct understanding of words depends on two factors:

Words used in translation change meaning over time. Consider “prevent” (KJV) in 1Thess. 4:15, versus “go before” (NASB, others). Which is the correct meaning? There are two ways to know:

- Find the *true definition* of the *original* Greek word. The Greek word Paul wrote actually *meant*, “go before” to both Paul and his original readers.

- Examine the *context* surrounding the word. In our example, vs. 16 confirms the meaning “go before.” Both the original meaning of the word and its context agree.

Sometimes translators use only one English word as the translation for several different Greek words. In the NT there are several different Greek words, all of which are translated by the one English word, “praise,” (e.g. Jn. 9:24(KJV); Eph. 1:6; Heb. 2:12; 1 Pet. 4:11). Each word has a different meaning. If the student is not aware of this and does not study to see what each word actually means, the student will not understand what the NT is communicating to us about the practice of “praise.”

What Is The Literary Context Of Those Words?

Individual words and individual verses *have meaning only within their context*. Ignoring this had led to virtually all the error and heresy that exists.

The most important question a Bible student can ask is, “What is the point?” What is the author’s train of thought? What did he say *before and after* the sentence I’m reading? How does this word or sentence relate to surrounding words and sentences? After one has carefully and honestly searched out the *exact definition* of words, one must determine their grammatical relationship to surrounding sentences; one must ascertain the meaning of *phrases*.

As important as finding the exact meaning of individual words, it is equally important to look carefully at the *context* in which those words appear. The context is *the writing that surrounds* the word or verses we are studying. The *immediate context* is what comes just before and just after the verse. The *remote context* ranges from the remainder of the chapter, to the book, to the whole Scripture.

Jn.9:3 says the parents and child in this story had not sinned. So let’s deal with this statement: “This verse is part of the inspired Bible and its *literal and plain sense* means that these people were sinless.” Is this really the *meaning* of Jesus words? It surely *appears* to be so. If not, how do we demonstrate it? We can find the answer by considering:

- What does the *remote context* of Scripture teach about human sinlessness, (e.g. Rom. 3:9-10, 23; 1 Jn. 1:8-10)? We learn that Scripture emphatically declares that all men, without exception, are sinners. Therefore we are forced to look for an interpretation of Jesus’ words that is consistent with this remote context.

- We examine the immediate context of this phrase by asking, “*What question* was Jesus answering,” (vs. 2)? Were the disciples asking if the people were sinners? Or were they asking if sin was the cause of this man’s blindness? Jesus’ statement relates directly to their question. What does He mean? He means that this affliction was not caused by these people’s sin.

So is there a contradiction between Jesus and Paul, who said, “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*” (Rom. 3:23)? No, the meaning of Jesus’ words as per the immediate context, agree with Paul’s teaching in the remote context. Until one can make both contexts agree, one must continue to study.

In studying Biblical context.

1. Think of all possible, legitimate meanings for the verse or words you are studying. Which meanings present problems of interpretation?
2. Read the verse in its context. Read enough to get the progress of thoughts or events. Decide what you think is the basic thought of the whole section.
3. Examine the verse more closely. Are there any *connecting* words at the beginning of the verse? (e.g. “Therefore,” “But” etc.)
4. Try to answer the questions: “What does this verses mean *as determined by its context?*” “Does this meaning harmonize with what the Bible says elsewhere on this same subject?”

What Is The Cultural/Historical Context Of Those Words?

The Bible was written in a specific *historical setting*. The meaning of its words relates directly to the people who first received it, *as they understood the words* in their cultural setting. We must try to find what part of its original historical context is also applicable for us today.

Try this with Deut. 22:5-12. How many of us today believe it is sinful for a woman to wear pants, or for a Scotsman to wear a skirt (kilt)? Who among us owns a house with a “parapet on the roof?” Do any of our Christian gardeners hesitate to sow our gardens with different kinds of seed? Should a Christian farmer be careful to not hitch his ox and donkey together? How many “sinners” do we have among us because of mixing “wool and linen together?” And how many Christians have obeyed the command to make tassels on the

four corners of our garment? If we do not take these commands seriously for ourselves, why not? And if we refuse to take *these* Divine commands personally, on what basis do we take *other* commands personally? What makes the difference? Are we able to figure out which commands are still obligatory and which are not?

How many churches *reject* the requirements of OT law regarding animal sacrifice, or of eating pork? How many of those same churches *observe* the OT laws requiring tithing? How do we know when it is appropriate to reject one command but to obey another? And is it not, at least *remotely* possible, that many of the sexual commands, including those dealing with "homosexuality," are among those that no longer apply to us today?

This *human, historical, cultural side* of the Bible is the reason we must "interpret" it for ourselves in light of today's situation. Even though we may know what is the "plain meaning" of certain Scriptures, that "plain meaning" may not at all be applicable to us. So if we have successfully answered the beginning question, "what was the *actual word* written by the author?" and if we have discovered "what that word *actually meant* to those *original recipients*," then we must decide *if* and *how* the meaning of that exact word might have *relevance to us*?

Part of our answer comes as we try to answer, "*why* did God say this to them?" Was there a purely *local situation* addressed that required only *local application*? Does the same situation exist for us? When removed from its historical and cultural setting, will it retain that same meaning/application? For example does 1 Cor. 7:26 mean that if *we* are single, *we* should remain unmarried? This is obviously what it meant to the original recipients. But what was true about their specific historical/cultural circumstance that made that advice *appropriate for them*, but *inappropriate for us*? Even though we may see clearly a command relating to specific people in specific circumstances, we must not assume that the same command is binding on all men for all time, regardless of their circumstances.

Every Scripture originated in a geographical, historical, cultural setting. It automatically reflects the language, customs and social mores of the time. In many instances it is crucial to know something about that background in order to make sense of what we read. If we interpret according to our own culture we will

frequently misunderstand either the original meaning or the modern application of that word.

Sometimes identical words and statements have different *meanings*. In England a man may say a woman is *homely* by which he means she is home loving and unpretentious. In America if a man says a woman is *homely* he means she is unattractive and maybe even ugly. In India, saying a man is like an *owl* is an insult, because Indian culture interprets this to mean the man is *stupid*. But in America saying a man is like an *owl* is to praise him for his *wisdom*. Same word: opposite meanings.

Every philologist knows that word meanings change over time. In 1611, when the King James translation of the Bible was made, the word "prevent" meant to "precede, to go before." Today the same word means to "prohibit or stop." Thus modern translations are right to reject "prevent" in favor of "precede" in 1 Thess. 4:15, (KJV).

"Double portion," (2 Kg. 2:9), most probably refers to *inheritance of the firstborn*, rather than "twice as much." The *cultural background* of this phrase, (e.g. Deut. 21:17) indicates Elisha wanted to inherit Elijah's ministry as a "first-born" son. Thus in our culture this phrase does not mean the same as it did in the culture which coined it. Those in Charismatic circles who ask God for a "double anointing" based on this verse, are misusing it.

The *first and primary meaning* of any scripture is *what it meant to the people who originally received it*. And it may not have the same meaning or application to us as it did to them. Remember this basic rule about Biblical interpretation:

A text cannot mean now, what it never could have meant to its author or his readers.

As example, what is the meaning of "*that which is perfect*," in 1 Cor. 13:10? Does Paul have in mind "the completed New Testament" as many modern interpreters say? Even though this is a widely adopted interpretation of these words, this is one thing this text *cannot possibly* mean! Neither Paul nor his readers knew a "New Testament" was in the works. When the Corinthians received this epistle and read this verse, they *could not have thought*, "Oh, when the New Testament is completed, then prophecy and tongues will cease." Such an interpretation would make zero sense

to them. For that reason, (as well as others), *“that which is perfect” cannot refer to “the completed New Testament.”*

What does it mean to *“take up our cross daily”* and follow Jesus, (Lk. 9:23)? What did it mean to the people who first heard it? They were familiar with the practice of requiring a condemned criminal to carry his own cross to the place of execution. *Those* people understood Jesus was saying that those who follow Him must die to their personal agendas and preferences every day. In some cases they would face actual physical death for His sake. We are *obligated* to interpret according to this *original meaning*. Therefore it is a *misuse* of this Scripture for us to refer to enduring difficult situations and difficult people, as *“this is just my cross to bear.”* Such an idea *would* not, and *could* not have occurred to the people who first received this saying. Therefore it cannot *mean* that.

What Geographical Elements Might Be Important In Understanding The Text?

Joel 2:23 promises *“the former rain and the latter rain.”* A modern religious movement sprang up called the “Latter Rain Movement,” claiming to be the fulfillment of this prophecy. In Israel there were two main rainy seasons: the “early rain” at the time of crop sowing and the “latter rain” near the end of the growing season as crops matured. God was promising to bless *them* by sending *real rain* to bless *their* crops, both at the “early” time of sowing and again, “later” as the crops matured. God was not promising to send the Holy Spirit at two different historical periods. And in this Scripture God was not promising *anything* to *us*. To apply this Scripture to *us* is a misuse of Scripture. To apply this Scripture to the sending of the Holy Spirit is to spiritualize it without warrant. This Scripture did not originally refer to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Therefore it is irresponsible to use it now to support some conjectured “latter day out-pouring of God’s Spirit.” Those who build upon this verse, their hopes for a new dispensing of the Holy Spirit in our day, have an illegitimate hope built on a false foundation, and all due to shoddy Bible study!

What Social Customs Are Important In Understanding This Text?

Jesus washes His disciple’s feet, (Jn. 13:3-5), and asks if they understood what He had done, (vs. 12). Then He tells them to do

the same, (vs. 14-15). Does this text apply to us? If so, how? In that culture people traveled mostly by foot and with shoes that were more like sandals. Their feet became very dirty when they traveled from place to place. Their *cultural practice* was for a household *servant* to wash the feet of visiting guests. Jesus would not be expected to wash their feet because He is "*Teacher and Lord*," (vs. 13). We have no such practice because we have no such need. But if we can discover the *principle*, we can make an *application*.

Jesus says He did this to give us an "*example*," (vs. 15). If He is "*Lord*..." yet takes the place of a servant to wash their feet, they should be willing to be servants to each other *whatever* the need may be. The principle is: "*serve* one another with *humility*." So we do not literally "wash one another's feet" because doing so has no meaning for us. But if we practice the *principle* of serving each other in humility, we follow Jesus' example, and His teaching.

Does The Passage Truly Speak To Our Present Situation?

A given passage may be very clear and precise in its meaning and application to its original cultural context, yet its particulars may have no application at all to our modern culture. One of the best examples of this is found in the controversy in the first century church over whether Gentile converts must be circumcised in order to be fully accepted into Christian fellowship. Acts 15:19-29 contains the conclusion reached by the church council. It consists of two elements:

1. A *statement of the requirements* to be made of Gentile saints. They are to avoid things sacrificed to idols, and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication, (vs.20, 29).
2. A *specific reason stated* for these requirements. "*Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath*," (vs. 21).

It is clear from this text that the specific reason for these requirements is that Gentile saints were surrounded by Jewish saints whose dedication to Moses' writings would not allow them to conscientiously eat things sacrificed to idols, or things strangled, or meat with blood in it. If Jewish saints had not surrounded these Gentile saints, no such prohibitions would have been made. Eating blood, things strangled, and meat offered to idols are not modern ethical problems because Moses' law is not determinative for

Christians and both Jew and Gentile Christians understand that those OT prohibitions have been nullified. Since today in our culture we will not offend a Jewish saint by eating blood or things strangled or meat offered to idols we are free to do so. The *situation* that required those original prohibitions no longer exists therefore the prohibitions are not valid. Thus this original, very specific “commandment” to Gentile Christians to not eat blood, is not a commandment we take seriously because its purely *cultural/cultic setting* is so far removed from our own.

We perhaps should add that the restriction against “fornication” remains valid in whatever specific form it is applicable to our culture, simply because God’s condemnation of “fornication” is cross-cultural and not historically peculiar. In the Acts 15 passage the “fornication” involved was doubtless that of Gentiles using temple prostitutes. It is the same problem Paul addressed in 1 Cor. 6:15, 16. Neither passage addresses any *specific* sexual issue because the word “fornication” does not do so. The word itself is a generic word describing *any* forbidden sexual activity. It must be clarified by its context in order to have any specific meaning. While it is true that all forbidden sexual activity is included in this word, nevertheless in its Acts 15 context it has specific meaning and application to idol worship, as is obvious from its connection with eating meat sacrificed to idols and eating blood. Thus Acts 15 forbids Gentiles from deliberately harming the consciences of Jewish brethren by eating blood, and from having sexual intercourse with pagan temple prostitutes. In neither case do we take this passage as specifically applicable to us today.

Finding The Historical Context

Think as you read: “What was the situation *in the church* or *in Israel*, among *those people*,” that accounts for the precise words of my subject text? What was the situation *in the city*, or *in the nation*?” “What was the *political* situation?” What *historical era* does the book deal with?

Valid interpretation of individual verses in Scripture must harmonize with the entire Biblical revelation. If one’s interpretation of a Scripture contradicts other Scriptures, one’s interpretation is wrong. The Holy Spirit does not contradict Himself.

Reading the Bible through on a regular basis will give a good foundation for avoiding the mistake of drawing conclusions from a limited perspective. As example, Paul writes, "*I bow my knees before the Father,*" (Eph. 3:14). Thus we have "Apostolic example," witnessed to by inspired Scripture, that bowing the knees in prayer is Biblical. But this does not mean kneeling is the only acceptable posture for prayer, because *other Scriptures* authorize prayer while raising hands, standing, or lying prostrate.

Heresies and false doctrine appear to have Biblical support because their promoters use only the verses that appear to teach their doctrine while ignoring others. If a verse seems to give new and great revelation one must resist adopting such new "revelation" until one has thoroughly compared it with the rest of what Scripture says.

What was once binding upon God's people may not necessarily be binding today. For example, Scripture shows that God commanded His people to not eat pork. But other Scriptures show that God Himself lifted that restriction (e.g. Acts 10:9-15; Mk. 7:19; Col.2:16). So it is actually *unBiblical* for people to attempt to please God now, by observing any of these Biblical food laws.

Some Biblical mandates remain in force in *principle*, though having been altered in their *specific* form. For example, Saturday Sabbath keeping is practiced today by sincere people who get their "authority" in the OT law for Israel. But the NT revelation of the New Covenant, the meaning of Christ's resurrection, and the practice of the early church shows the seventh day Sabbath was not practiced by first century Christians, who rather began gathering for worship, under guidance from Christ's Apostles, on the first day of the week.

Some take the NT alone as modern authority for Christians, thereby eliminating instrumental music from worship. The primary Scripture used to enforce this misunderstanding, is 2 Jn. 9-11, which requires that we "abide in the doctrine of Christ." This phrase is interpreted to mean that only what Christ personally taught, or what He inspired His Apostles to teach, is acceptable authority for Christians. But careful study of both immediate and remote contexts, demonstrates that this phrase refers to the specific doctrine of the divine nature of Christ. The "anti-christ" denied Christ's divine nature, and such doctrine was to be avoided at all cost (2 Jn. 7; 1 Jn.2:18-26). Thus the "doctrine of Christ" in which one

must "abide" is the true doctrine that Christ is equally God and man. Thus this text must be perverted in order to use it to forbid obtaining Biblical authority outside the NT. This "interpretation" ignores the harmony between OT & NT and the essential oneness of God's revelation. The Bible is not two books; it is one unified revelation of God's mind. And, by the way, Christ is also the Author of the OT, (1Pt. 1:10, 11). Therefore in the broad sense, "the doctrine of Christ" includes everything written by His inspiration, in both OT and NT!

Using the NT alone, or Gospels alone, or the Epistles alone to form belief is invalid. Learning the full truth about any Bible subject requires treating the entire Bible with equal dignity and respect, and using *all* of what it says as the mixture from which we make our final conclusions.

The reader should not conclude from our remarks that we think cultural or historical contexts will settle all questions about Biblical meaning and present application. But no one should feel they have done their Biblical research until they have tried their best to understand *Scripture as its original readers must necessarily have understood it. What it meant to them, is its true meaning.* We must acknowledge that anything written by Paul must *necessarily* have meant something *specific* both to him and his readers. He *could not* possibly have written words that meant nothing to himself and he *would not* have written nonsense to his readers.

Given the tendency of words to change meanings over time, plus the fact that cultural practices, mores, concepts of good and bad, etc. also change – sometimes *dramatically* – we are faced with the task of uncovering the *original setting* of all Biblical writings. If we are unwilling to do the hard work necessary for this we should withdraw from Biblical study and most definitely we should cease to pose as teachers of the Bible. Without such hard research we will be led astray in our own conclusions and we will consequently lead astray those whom we teach.

Do I Have The Courage To Stand Alone If Necessary?

Independent and honest research will occasionally turn up those "rare gems" of truth that runs counter to mainstream thought. If the new ideas are sufficiently "radical" the discoverer is faced with the dilemma of fully embracing that truth and risking

ostracism – or worse – or simply keeping it to himself and refusing to share the truth that would set others free. The church is eternally indebted to Martin Luther and other like minded “Reformers” who saw the “new truth” of salvation by grace and with consummate courage proclaimed it to all who would listen. And where would we be if Peter, James, John, Paul and the other first century apostles and saints had not boldly preached the “Gospel” in the very face of a dangerous and threatening Jewish court that had already murdered their Master? Their indomitable courage is the foundation upon which the whole church rests.

Not every truth deserves equal commitment. But a person of integrity must be willing to embrace truth even when it flies in the face of all they have previously known. They must be willing, at least for the sake of their own personal integrity, to be honest with what they find in Scripture. If circumstances exist that make it advisable for them to withhold some revelation about their findings because they genuinely feel others “are not able to bear it,” then they have Jesus as their example, (Jn. 16:12). We are never right to simply stick new ideas in other people’s faces when we know they have no way to deal appropriately with those ideas. But we are also culpable if we refuse to use our information to help others who may be open to it, and who may need it.

PART TWO

HOMOSEXUALITY

The issue of homosexuality is so crucial that we must make every effort to put aside preconceptions, so as to assimilate as much of the available evidence as possible and to examine that evidence with objective integrity. What matters, is what the Bible actually *does* and *does not* say about this practice. Passionately held religious beliefs mean nothing to God unless those beliefs are in harmony with His word. Passionately held religious beliefs that conflict with Bible truth are virtually always hurtful to humanity. Proof of this is recorded in the blood of the Inquisitions, in the horrors of slavery, in the insanity of "Salem" type "witch trials," in the subjugation of women to men, and in the torture and martyrdom inflicted on sincere believers by a misguided church. Spiritual ignorance and Biblical illiteracy on the part of Christians, especially Christian leaders, have done more to savage the integrity of the Christian church and to destroy confidence in the Bible as a spiritual guide, than anything else in history. The worst crimes against humanity have been committed in the name of "upholding the truth of the Bible." Those who believe that a final day of reckoning will bring them face to face with the Ultimate Judge of all, to Whom they must give account for their deeds done in the body and from Whom they will receive an absolutely impartial judgment, (Rom. 2:6-11), must not trust "*what has been said by them of old time,*" (cf. Matt. 5:21ff). Inhumane treatment of other people is a serious spiritual crime that cannot be mitigated by a plea of "sincerity." Inhumane subjugation of women to men, of black people to slave owners, and of homosexually oriented people to heterosexual power structures will surely be reckoned with. We simply cannot afford to be wrong on such issues. Those who look soberly and objectively at the treatment of homosexuals in our society must ask themselves such questions as: "Is this treatment consistent with God's love for the world? Is it consistent with Christ's command that we love others just as He loved us?" "Should we give as much grace to homosexuals as we have received from God?" "Even if homosexuals are truly wrong, is it right for us to despise them?" Every serious believer in Christ *must* make the mightiest effort possible to look objectively into Scripture to see if there is more to

learn about this subject than is currently acknowledged. We must not read the Bible in the light of our prejudices. We must allow the truth to destroy all prejudices and preconceptions. Only a fool thinks himself to be infallible – on any issue. Nothing can be learned by one whose mind is closed to the possibility of personal error. We cannot claim honesty and sincerity in pursuit of God’s will unless we are willing to let His word define *all* of our attitudes and actions, regardless of how drastically we may need to change. In no other study is honesty and integrity more crucial than it is here. We encourage our readers to ask this simple, personal question: “Am I *able* and am I *willing* to change my whole concept of the legitimacy of homosexuality if objective study of the Bible requires me to do so?” If you cannot answer “yes,” there is no point in reading this study or anything else on this subject. If you can answer “yes,” continue to read and think seriously through every issue raised in this study. Trusting that we all desire Biblical truth at whatever price, we invite you to join us as we begin where the Bible begins on this topic.

What Was The Sin Of Sodom?

The details of this story, given in condensed fashion, are these. Male humans in Sodom attempt to have sex with male angels who visit Lot, (Gen. 19:4ff). God destroys them. Conclusion by the majority of readers: God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because of the extreme wickedness of their “homosexuality.” It *may* be true that God destroyed Sodom because of homosexuality, but that fact must be learned from sources other than the story in Gen. 19. We must remember that God had already informed Abraham of His intention to destroy Sodom before the events of Gen. 19 occurred. God said He would destroy Sodom, “*because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave,*” (Gen. 18:20-21). God says nothing here about the nature of this “very grave sin.” Therefore it is altogether illegitimate to conclude that the attempt of Sodom’s men to rape Lot’s visitor’s serves to define the nature of that “very grave sin.” If indeed we can find, from other Scriptures, God’s own definition of that sin, then we will be on certain ground. If there is no other evidence to guide us, we must exercise simple integrity by refusing to draw conclusions

from an incident that occurs *after* God's previously stated intention to destroy those cities.

As a *necessary* part of our investigation, we must examine this story in its cultural context. This story is set in a culture vastly different from ours. We are horrified that Lot would sacrifice his daughters in order to protect the strangers staying with him. Yet "hospitality" in Lot's time and culture gave protection to guests in one's house at the expense, if necessary, of one's children. Our own intellectual, spiritual, moral and cultural training will not even allow us to imagine such a situation. Thus when we interpret this Genesis account in light of its cultural context, we rightfully decide that we must not follow Lot's example today. By following this process of Biblical interpretation we correctly *reject* a clear Biblical "example" as a guideline for us to practice familial sacrifice in order to protect our guests. But our inconsistency immediately appears as we read the rest of the story.

Our reaction is the opposite when we consider the behavior of the men of Sodom toward Lot's guests. We first *suppose* that the sin of Sodom is homosexuality. Then we *suppose* that God destroys Sodom *because* of that homosexuality. Then our *twofold supposition* becomes *determinative* for our modern stance against homosexuality.

Our first mistake in reading this section is to take it for granted that the men of Sodom were homosexuals. Nothing in Scripture makes this conclusion appropriate. There is no valid way to determine whether *any* of the men of Sodom were homosexuals. Lot has prospective sons-in-law, so obviously not all Sodom's men were homosexuals. This story is not about homosexuality. It is about violent gang rape. It is likely that the men involved were very much *heterosexual* and that their sexual attempt upon Lot's visitors grows not out of homosexual tendencies, but out of horrific anti-social, violent abhorrence of strangers. The fact that the intended victims were male, as were the perpetrators, is *incidental to the main point*, which is that *Sodom was entirely wicked and violent*. They were committing an aggressive, violent act against strangers, that, by the standards of their cultural setting, inflicted maximum humiliation upon them: forcing upon them an act that "made them into women," (Chrysostom's evaluation of such an act, *Commentary on Romans*, Homily 4). The ancient practice in the Middle East of subjecting defeated enemies to anal penetration is well

documented, (cf. Peter Coleman, *Christian Attitudes To Homosexuality*, pp. 34, 54; W. K. Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 20-21). Human societies, throughout history and cross-culturally, have often subjected strangers, newcomers, trespassers and defeated foes to homosexual rape as a way to demonstrate their subordination. It was the ultimate emasculation; reduction to "womanhood." That this is doubtless the situation with which Gen. 19 deals is largely demonstrable by considering the other passages in Scripture that refer to Sodom.

We showed that when God first threatened to destroy Sodom, no indication was given as to what form their wickedness took. No *evidence* allows us to *automatically* think God destroys Sodom *because* of homosexuality. It will surely surprise many readers to know that no such idea appears in any Scripture that exists. It is an *assumption that cannot be verified by any other Scripture* that refers to Sodom's wickedness. We are helped greatly in this matter by the fact that, though Gen. 18 and 19 do not specify the reason for Sodom's destruction, many other Scriptures actually detail the sins for which Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. But our surprise is that in *not even one* is homosexuality either stated or implied. Consider:

In Dt. 29, Israel's unfaithfulness to God threatens to bring God's punishment upon them as it did upon Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, (vs. 23). The cause of this doom is specifically stated: *abandonment of the covenant, and devotion to other gods*, (vs. 25, 26).

Dt. 32:32, 33 makes reference to the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah, but with no mention of homosexuality.

In Isa. 1:10; 3:9, 14-15, Sodom's crime is *injustice and cruelty*. Elders and princes are condemned for "*plunder of the poor...crushing my people...and grinding the face of the poor*," (vs. 14).

In Isa. 13, God promises to cast down Babylon "*like Sodom and Gomorrah*," (vs. 19), for *aggression against its neighbors*, (vs. 1-18). Again nothing is said about homosexual activity.

In Jer. 23:14, Israel's prophets are condemned because "*they commit adultery and walk in lies; they also strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns back from their wickedness*." Then God says "*All of them are like Sodom to Me, and her inhabitants like Gomorrah*." Thus Sodom's and Gomorrah's sins are in the

category of general wickedness such as *adultery, lies, and injustice*. It is more than strange that if homosexuality was their primary sin, it is not listed here along with adultery.

Lam. 4:6 refers to the overthrow of Sodom but without identifying her sins.

In Ezek. 16:44 - 59, Israel's evil is again compared to Sodom's, and Sodom's sins are specified this way: "*This was the iniquity of your sister Sodom; She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty and committed abomination before Me; therefore I took them away as I saw fit,*" (vs. 49, 50). Surely it must go without saying that if God Himself states His reasons for destroying Sodom, that statement outweighs anything else anyone ever says. In the quoted verses God says *His reason* for destroying Sodom was her *pride, gluttony, prosperous ease and indifference to the poor and needy*. Not even a hint of homosexuality here. Not even in the word "abomination," as we will demonstrate in the next section.

In Amos 4:11, chastisement awaits Israel like that visited upon Sodom and Gomorrah, because of her *oppression of the poor, immorality and injustice*, (cf. vs. 1). Similarity in judgment suggests similarity in sin, yet again not even a hint of homosexuality here.

In Zeph. 2:9, 10, Sodom is again a symbol of desolating judgment visited upon Babylon, Moab and Ammon. God's stated reason for this judgment is, "*This they shall have for their pride, because they have reproached and made arrogant threats against the people of the Lord of Hosts.*" If homosexuality was their grave sin, wouldn't God have at least *mentioned* that?

In Jude's New Testament epistle, Sodom's sin is categorized as sexual in nature, but the problem addressed there is not homosexual intercourse. Rather, Sodom's people are said to have done as the fallen angels who, "*indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh (sarkos heteras, D.C.),*" (Jude 7). Homosexuality *cannot* be the issue here because the "*flesh*" they were pursuing is called "*heteras,*" which means "*other, different.*" This is the same Greek word from which we obtain the English "*hetero*" as in *heterosexual* – the exact *opposite* of what we must find if the sin of Sodom was "*homo*" sexual! The point is that the men of Sodom transgressed proper human boundaries by

attempting to have sex with Lot's angelic visitors, just as angels transgressed their proper position to have sex with human women. Thus it is imminently provable that, whatever the men of Sodom were doing sexually, they were doing it with "other" – *heteras* – than their own sex. They were not seeking to have sex with those "homos" – *like* themselves – but with those "heteras" – *different!*

In Matt. 10:12-15; 11:24; Lk. 10:10-12, the context links Sodom and Gomorrah to the sin committed by cities in Jesus' day, of rejecting the ambassadors He sends to preach the gospel. The problem is *rejection of God's gospel of the kingdom, not homosexuality.*

We cannot escape the clear truth here: *NO Scripture that actually describes the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, makes any reference to homosexuality. In every instance the Prophets, Apostles, Jesus and Moses agree – the crimes of Sodom and Gomorrah have nothing basically to do with sex and everything to do with injustice, oppression and violence.* Thus in Scripture Sodom and Gomorrah came to symbolize the sins of greed, injustice, insensitivity to the need and pain of others, and violent exploitation. Sodom is repeatedly cited as an example of God's willingness to destroy an entire people because of these kinds of sins, but *not once is homosexuality named as the particular cause of God's judgment.* Where sexual sin was involved in their case, it took on the character of violence and injustice, and the "sexual orientation" of the sinners was as likely to have been heterosexual as homosexual. How can anyone explain the *total absence* of any mention of homosexuality, *in any verse that details any of the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, if their chief sin was homosexuality???* How is it possible that their minor sins are specified, but nowhere does God specify this "chief sin of homosexuality?" Simple integrity demands that any Bible student honors *what the Bible itself states* as the reason for Sodom's destruction. To ignore the above evidence and continue to claim that homosexuality was the reason of their destruction, demonstrates basic spiritual dishonesty. Here's the bottom line: **According to all specific Biblical references, Sodom and Gomorrah were not destroyed due to homosexuality!!! They were never even accused of practicing homosexuality!!!**

So, Gen. 19 cannot honestly be used as an illustration of homosexual sin. In fact such a sin *did not occur*, for the story shows the men of Sodom were blinded *before* they could fulfill their threats against Lot's guests. The most that can be made of Gen. 19 is that these men *threatened* God's angels with homosexual *gang rape*. Homosexual gang rape – real or threatened – does not define homosexual orientation any more than heterosexual gang rape (of which many actual cases exist) defines heterosexual orientation. One may have to swallow hard in order to accept this, but one truth is very clear: *The Bible does not condemn Sodom and Gomorrah because of homosexuality*. It matters nothing at all how many preachers have said otherwise. Our readers can easily establish this fact for themselves by simply using a concordance to find every Scripture that makes any reference to Sodom and Gomorrah and to just *read* them. *No Scripture exists that accuses these cities of homosexuality!* Isn't that an outrageous statement to make in light of the long and hallowed religious tradition that so completely identifies these cities with homosexuality, that our word "Sodomite" is used to excoriate homosexuals in our day? We must do at least one thing with this information: *we must cease completely to use the story in Gen. 19 to condemn homosexuality*. Integrity demands that we not use the Bible to prove something that it does not prove. And honesty with Biblical facts requires that we never again refer to homosexuality as "Sodomy." If homosexuality is a sin, other Scriptures must prove it. Gen. 19 does not do so. Nor do any of the other Scriptures that refer to God's judgment on Sodom. Indeed, homosexuality never even enters the picture!!!

No modern homosexual man would condone the conduct of the Sodomites any more than any modern heterosexual male would approve the conduct of the men in Jdg. 19:22-25. In this story a group of males sexually threaten a Levite while he is returning home with his concubine, (Jdg. 19:22). The owner of the house where they stayed offers his own virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine to them, to "*ravish them*," (vs. 24). The men rape and abuse the concubine all night and she dies, (20:5). This rape of his concubine was said to be "*lewd and disgraceful*," (20:6). This story, like Gen. 19, is used as an example of judgment against homosexuality. But such usage is equally illegitimate.

It should be evident that the men in this account were not homosexual. Their intention was to humiliate the strangers and

when a woman was offered to them, they gang raped her. They did not care whether their victim was male or female. If they could not humiliate the stranger personally, then they would humiliate him impersonally by raping his woman. The issue was not sexuality but violence, humiliation, mistreatment of strangers, gang rape and murder. We have fixed the word "homosexual" in our minds so strongly that when we read this story we can hardly even think about the *real* crime that occurred here. *There was no homosexual act committed!* The real tragedy that did occur was a violent attack by a gang of thugs upon a defenseless woman who died from the attack. Why have we used this text to denounce homosexuality when the actual crime is *murder by heterosexual rape!*?!? And how can we focus on homosexuality in *this* story and virtually never hear anything said about the *heterosexual rape* of Dinah by the Shechemites, (Gen. 34) or the *heterosexual rape* of Tamar by Amnon, (2 Sam. 13)? No *honest* Biblical exegete uses texts dealing with *actual heterosexual rape* to prove that *heterosexuality* is wrong. Why, then, do we use texts dealing with *attempted homosexual rape* to prove that *homosexuality* is wrong? In both cases emphasis is on violence and rape, not on sexual orientation. In the case of David's adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, no one condemns *heterosexuality* as the real culprit. We can see that the problem is injustice, murder, adultery and abuse of power. It has nothing to do with the legitimacy of heterosexual sex. In the same way, the texts of Genesis 19 and Judges 19 are not about same-sex relationships. They deal with the sins of merciless violence and injustice that Bible writers *actually name* in the other texts that refer to Sodom's and Gomorrah's sin.

It appears to be obvious that we are guilty of isolating these two incidents for special attention simply because the initial threat of rape was homosexual in *implication*. The simple fact is clear: No Scripture clearly defines homosexuality per se, as being of any particular concern to God. Since no such text exists, it becomes necessary to *manufacture* texts, through misinterpretation, to come up with evidence that condemns this lifestyle. If Scripture condemns homosexuality *as such* we will have to find the condemnation in other passages than those normally used.

Perhaps a word is in order at this point, regarding the modern use of the words "sodomy" and "sodomize." Modern dictionaries offer these meanings of "sodomy": "1. Copulation with a member

of the same sex or with an animal. 2. Non-coital and esp. anal or oral copulation with a member of the opposite sex," (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*). Do you see what is wrong with this? The word "sodomy" obviously purports to classify an act that was especially characteristic of the men of Sodom. But we have demonstrated that this dictionary definition does not at all describe what we see in the Biblical text. The only *legitimate*, and Biblically correct, definition for "sodomy" would be: "attempted same-sex gang rape by males." All other "definition" is *placed upon* the word with zero warrant. Oral sex and anal penetration have *nothing* to do with "Sodom" and bestiality is totally outside the scope of anything the Bible suggests occurred in Sodom. The reason this is important is illustrated by the fact that in May, 2001, the Arizona State legislature struck down what they called "archaic sex laws" that *criminalized* oral sex and anal sex as acts of "sodomy." Such laws existed for no better reason than that humans *read into* the Genesis story of Sodom, something that is simply *not there!* There was never a legitimate basis for any such laws existing and it was right to strike them down. The Bible account of Sodom's destruction is the only evidence we have of what occurred there. And the Bible says *nothing – anywhere –* about Sodom's "homosexuality." We have made an *inference*, then accused Sodom's men on the basis of that inference, then *coined* the word "sodomy" to describe an act that we *imagine* to have been committed by those men! There exists no legitimate reason to define "sodomy" in terms of sexual behavior of any kind. "Sodomy" would best be defined as an attempted act of humiliation and violence against strangers. The Bible will support nothing more than that.

Abomination

We must examine the word "abomination" because the tendency for most people it seems is to automatically see this word, every time it appears in Scripture, as a Divine denunciation against homosexuality. Indeed, for many people "abomination" is a *synonym* for homosexuality. Let us see what the Scriptures reveal about this word.

The Hebrew word translated "abomination" occurs a total of 116 times in the OT. Out of this total, 43 occurrences of this word are in the book of Ezekiel. This accounts for more than a third of its

uses, showing its special importance to Ezekiel's prophetic purposes. Some of these uses are not helpful because they do not specify the things God considers abominable. But many of these uses are specific, revealing that, because of their contextual setting, the probable meaning of abominations in Ezekiel is *idolatry*, (cf. Ezek. 6:9, 11; 7:20; 8:6, 9, 13, 15, 17; 14:6; 16:36, 44-59; 18:12, 13; 20:4-8; 22:2ff). To illustrate:

Ezek. 6:1-7, 9, 11, condemns Israel for the idolatrous high places she has erected. God's wrath is specifically poured out against "*your idols*," (v. 4, 5, 6, 9), after which Israel has "*played the harlot*," (vs. 9b), which has caused God to be "*hurt by their adulterous heart*," (vs. 9a). This unfaithfulness to God by abandoning Him and turning to idols, is called "*abominations*," (vs. 9c, 11).

Ezek. 7:20, joins idols and abomination in adjectival relation – "*abominable images*."

In Ezekiel 8 the prophet sees in a vision the house of the Lord where there are "*abominations*" in the sanctuary, (8:6). He is told to dig through the temple wall and "*go in and see the wicked abominations that they are committing here*," (8:9), which consist of "*all the idols of the house of Israel*," (8:10), including the images of "*jealousy*," (vs. 4, 5), "*Tammuz*," (vs. 14), and sun worship, (vs. 16), all of which are again called "*abominations*," (vs. 17). These uses suggest that all occurrences of "*abomination*" in Ezek 8 refer to *idolatry*. There is certainly no reference of any kind to homosexuality here.

In 14:6, "*idols*" and "*abominations*" are placed in parallelism.

Ezek. 16:36, again makes "*abomination*" an adjective to idols.

In Ezek. 16:44-59, "*abomination*" is used nine times in an allegory describing the harlotry of Jerusalem and her daughters as being worse than the abominations of her two sisters, Samaria and Sodom, together with their daughters. The whole chapter is filled with symbolism of sexual sin, but *in every instance* this symbolism refers to *heterosexual* sex, even though Sodom and her daughters are enlisted as examples! Incredibly, in a sexually cast passage, which is the perfect setting to refer to Sodom's supposed homosexuality, Ezekiel, consistently with *all other* prophets, *does not do so*. Ezekiel, along with all other prophetic writers, casts Sodom's sin not as homosexuality but as *injustice and social oppression of the poor, alien and powerless*. Doesn't this evidence *mean* anything?

This specific connection is made for example, in Ezek. 18:11-13. Judgment is spoken here of one who, *“eats at the mountain shrines (i.e., worships idols there) and defiles his neighbor’s wife,”* (vs. 11, obviously not homosexuality). He also *“oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore a pledge, but lifts up his eyes to the idols and commits abomination,”* (vs. 12). Finally God says, *“He lends money on interest and takes increase: will he live? He will not live! He has committed all these abominations, he will surely be put to death...”* (vs. 13). The connection of “abominations” with idol worship and injustice to others is too apparent for anyone to miss. None of this has anything to do with homosexuality.

Ezek. 20 again connects *“abominations,”* (vs. 4), directly to *“idols,”* (vs. 7, 8).

Ezek. 22:2ff refers to Israel’s *“abominations,”* (vs. 2), then lists the sins of *“shedding blood and...making idols,”* (vs. 3, 4, 6). Further, Israel has *“treated father and mother lightly...the alien they have oppressed ..the fatherless and widows they have wronged...you have despised My holy things and profaned My Sabbaths,”* (vs. 7, 8).

It is obvious from this study that for Ezekiel, the meaning of “abomination” has *nothing* to do with homosexuality. What God finds “abominable” is humans refusing to acknowledge Him as the One and Only True God and worshipping Him alone. To turn away from God to love other gods and worship their idols, is spiritual adultery. It is “abomination.” All social injustice, violence and oppression are likewise “abominable” to God. Thus when we encounter this word in Scripture we have no warrant to automatically connect it with sexual sin of *any* kind, least of all homosexuality. Rather, when we read the word “abomination” we must look carefully at the context to see exactly what God is denouncing. Any connection between “abomination” and “homosexuality” is found to be minimal, if indeed, it exists at all. Such connection does indeed seem to be made specifically in the “Holiness Code” of Leviticus, and this passage deserves our careful attention.

Homosexuality and the “Holiness Code”

First, let us list the specific components of this code:

*** “You are to perform My judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them...So shall you keep My statutes and My**

judgments; by which a man may live if he does them; I am the Lord," (Lev. 18:4-5).

Sex with immediate blood relatives forbidden, (18:6-18).

* Intercourse with a menstruating woman forbidden, (18:19).

One must not have intercourse with his neighbor's wife, (18:20).

* Parents must not offer their children to Molech, (18:21; 20:1-5).

A male must not lie with a male "*as one lies with a woman.*" It is "*abomination,*" (18:22). To do so incurs the death penalty, (Lev. 20:13). Lev. 18:22 and 20:13, are unambiguous both in prohibiting what seems to be "homosexual" conduct and attaching to it the penalty of death. But before making a decision about exactly what this means and how we might apply it today, consider that the context of this code is equally unambiguous on other issues that none of us observe today. More on this when we finish the list.

Bestiality forbidden, (18:23).

*** "You are to keep My statutes and My judgments, and shall not do any of these abominations,"** (18:26).

Honoring mother and father is required, (19:3)

* Keeping the Sabbath is obligatory, (19:3, 30).

* Turning to idols or "molten gods" is forbidden, (19:4).

* Violating formula for eating peace offering forbidden, (19:5-9).

* Farmers must not completely harvest their field but leave something for the needy, (19:9-10).

Lying, stealing and bearing false witness forbidden, (19:11, 12).

Injustice to others by oppression and theft forbidden, (19:13).

One must not curse a deaf man nor trip a blind man, (19:14).

Various forms of oppression and injustice forbidden, (19:15-18).

* It is forbidden to cross-breed animals, sow two kinds of seed in the same field, and wear clothing with two different kinds of fiber, (19:19).

*** "You are to keep My statutes,"** (19:19).

* If one has sex with another man's slave, he must offer appropriate sacrifices, (19:20-22).

* When crops are planted, they must not be harvested for the first three years; the fourth year the fruit is given to God, and on the fifth year it can be eaten, (19:23-25).

* It is forbidden to eat meat with blood still in it, (19:26a).

* Soothsaying and divination are forbidden, (19:26b).

* It is forbidden to trim the hair at the side of the head, or clip the edges of one's beard, or make tattoo marks on the body, (19:27-28).

Do not prostitute your daughter, (19:29).

* Do not use mediums or spiritists, (19:31).

One must honor the aged, (19:32).

One must do no wrong to strangers, (19:33-34).

One must deal fairly in weights and measures, (19:35--36).

*** "You shall thus observe all My statutes and all My ordinances, and do them: I am the Lord," (19:37).**

* Excommunication is prescribed for all who consult ghosts or familiar spirits, (Lev. 20:6-8).

* Death prescribed for children who dishonor parents, (20:9).

* Death prescribed for adulterers and those who commit incest, (20:10-12).

* For a male to lie with another male "as he lies with a woman," is to incur the death penalty, (20:13).

* If a man marries a woman and her mother, all three are burned to death, (20:14).

* If a human lies with an animal, both human and animal are killed, (20:15-16).

* Brother and sister incest participants must be "cut off" from the family, (20:17).

* If a man has sex with a menstruating woman, both must be cut off from their people, (20:18).

Incest participants are cursed, (20:19-21).

*** "You are therefore to keep all My statutes and all My ordinances and do them..." (20:22).**

* Contamination by "*unclean*" animals is forbidden, (20:25).

* Death is prescribed for mediums and spiritists, (Lev. 20:27).

* Spiritual leaders must not touch the dead, (Lev. 21:1-4, 10-12).

* Priests must not shave their head or corners of their beards or cut their body (21:5).

* Priests must not marry a prostitute, a non-virgin, a divorcee or a widow; a priest may marry only a virgin “*from his own people,*” (21:7, 13-14).

* Sexual activity by a priest’s unmarried daughter merits burning her to death, (21:9).

* No one with physical defects may be ordained as priest; no one is acceptable who is blind, lame, with one limb too long or short, has an impaired leg or hand, is hunchbacked, is too thin or small, has defective eyesight, has a festering rash or other skin disease or has damaged testicles, (21: 17-20).

In addition, a multitude of laws specific to feast days, sacrifices, temple regulations, Sabbath keeping, etc. occur in Lev. 23-27. God pronounces blessing on those who keep these laws, (e.g. 26:3-13), and severe punishment upon those who reject them, (e.g. Lev. 26:14-33). **Yet none of us keep any of those laws.**

The asterisks above mark those “laws” that we refuse to obey today, either as applied to the forbidden *act*, or to the *penalty* attached to disobedience. For example, we reject outright the necessity to distinguish between clean and unclean beasts. We do however accept the “law” that children must honor their parents, while rejecting the penalty of death for disobeyers. Note that we *accept* only 14 of these laws as presently valid and we *reject* 33 of these laws, which include God’s *five direct commands* that we must keep *all* of them. God does not allow us to pick and choose which ones of those laws we will honor. It is all or none. But not one of us is able or willing to accept this. We somehow understand that the vast majority of them – those marked with asterisks – cannot be enforced on people today. Yet we insist on holding tightly to the rest of them. Why isn’t it right to accept them *all* as binding on today’s Christian? Is it right to reject *any* of them, in light of God’s unmistakable demand for comprehensive acceptance? What *objective guidelines* exist that tell us reliably how to distinguish between the acceptable and the unacceptable laws? If we cannot *accept all of them*, then perhaps it is right to *reject all of them!* How do we truly honor God’s purpose in giving this section of text?

Our task is very complicated, but very obvious. Do not *all* these “holiness” prescriptions remain in force today? If not, why not? On what basis are we allowed to reject some while retaining others? Some fundamentally important questions about this text must be answered:

[1 God emphatically commanded *five times*, that His people keep *every one* of those laws.

Read again God’s five-fold command as shown in bold type above. There is no mistaking His intention. God gave this holiness code as a unified whole. It was not meant for dissection at any time by any people. God does not allow anyone to accept some of these laws and reject the rest. Whoever feels the need to accept *any part* of this code must accept it *all*. In terms of *this code*, it is literally “all or nothing!” But none of us believe that we must obey God’s **command** to keep all these “*statutes*” and “*ordinances*.” So we are forced, by our *rejection of some* of these laws, to *reject them all – as given in this code!* We believe this is the only viable stance to take regarding this “holiness code” for reasons given in the next paragraphs.

[2 To whom were these requirements given?

Answering this question is one absolutely necessary component of honest Bible study. Whether the text applies to us today may depend entirely on learning about its original recipients. For example, no one believes that to follow Jesus requires any of us to, “*sell all that you have and give to the poor, and come follow me,*” (Lk. 18:22). Though this is a direct command from the lips of Jesus Himself, we understand that its application is strictly limited to the “rich young ruler” whom He personally addressed. Many such examples may be given. Here in the holiness code, we have another example. **God is not addressing this code and its laws to humanity in general. He is specifically and solely commanding Israel.** Read those last two sentences again because this point is crucial! “*Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, I am the Lord your God...*” (Lev. 18:1) In the midst of this holiness code God says, “*I am the Lord your God who has separated you from the peoples... I have set you apart from the peoples to be mine,*” (Lev. 20:24, 26). By God’s own statement His singular objective in this code is to mark a distinctive social and religious line between Israel and all other nations. For other nations, *including ours*, to

attempt to implement this code is to subvert the very purpose of its creation. We merely imagine that this code's object is to establish moral standards for Israel. In fact, *its only purpose* is to isolate Israel from the rest of the world in terms of her religious, cultural and sociological characteristics. The inherent value in these regulations is therefore not *moral*, but *socio-religious*. We demonstrate that we understand this fact as applied to the items marked with an asterisk. We moderns practice none of those "laws." Then we stumble at the other "moral" laws in this list.

Any of those "moral" laws that are also binding upon us are binding only on the basis of their being codified in some other portion of Scripture. We must disallow their obligatory nature *as per this holiness code*, while acknowledging the obligatory nature of such of these laws as are repeated in other Scripture settings. That is, we must reject all forms of injustice and violence against neighbors, not because this holiness code prohibits such but because other texts contain those prohibitions as *generally applicable* to humanity. Those moral laws that God requires of all people for all time are contained elsewhere in Scripture. Inclusion of such prohibitions in the holiness code of Leviticus serves only to circumscribe the whole of Israel's religious, social and moral life, so as to mark them as "different" from all surrounding cultures. God's concern in this code is not morality; His concern is national and religious distinction.

We believe it is necessary to completely reject all of the specific laws, *as formulated in this code*, as being presently unenforceable. This is necessary because God's stated purpose for this code allows application to no one but Israel. Israel was required to keep all of them. No one else was required to keep any of them! If we insist on attempting to keep *any* of them, we are obligated to keep *all* of them.

If we lose any "moral absolutes" by rejecting this list, we will rediscover them in other texts, *if indeed they are God's absolutes*. If however, by rejecting the whole of this code, we actually *lose* some moral laws because we do not find those laws in other Scriptures, then we may conclude that those laws were not absolutes after all but were rather included in this code because of their particular *socio-religious* nature.

The *context* of the Holiness code, Lev. 17 – 27, is important to its understanding and application. The regulations laid down in this code relate directly to matters of great concern to the existence and perpetuity of the community of Israel. Israel's system of patrilineal land tenure, purity of physical descent, the special status of the priests and dwelling securely in the land is at stake. These are issues crucial to the very *definition* of Israelite culture. Their system of land tenure was based on patrilineal inheritance within the clan. If this system should fail, the "*sons of Israel*" will find themselves to be without land. Land inheritance required clear lines of descent and many pure descendants. Rules against certain forms of sexual intercourse were necessary, not because those forms were *inherently* immoral, but because they threatened pure descent, thereby threatening a clan's hold on their land. Thus rules pertaining to sexual intercourse protected pure lineage. This was the primary emphasis and purpose of the Holiness code. Laws forbidding certain partners for sexual intercourse served to prevent confusion of descent. Other laws constrained practices that did not positively promote that system. Intercourse with a menstruating woman was thought to more likely produce a female than a male. Intercourse between males would surely produce nothing to promote tribal inheritance. The same is true of intercourse with an animal. Substituting "normal" intercourse for either of these two would weaken and even kill a man's inheritance line.

Other non-sexual rules generally served as educational devices, by which Israel learned not to "mix" the customs and standards of the nations around them with their own. It is a mistake to think the word "moral" when we read the word "holy." It merely indicates "separateness." Israel was to be a "*holy*" i.e. "*separate*" nation. As such she must truly be distinguishable from all other nations in every part of her existence. Thus rules about mixing seed in sowing or different cloths in garments related to this issue of separateness.

Some rules related directly to practices that were characteristic of surrounding nations in conjunction with idolatrous worship. Those acts were prohibited not because of any inherent "impurity" in them, but because Israel learned thereby not to attach spiritual significance to those things and especially to avoid any seeming or real connection with idolatrous worship.

Other rules related to God's requirement that His spiritual leaders be spiritually whole individuals. As an example and only as

a *symbol*, this meant disallowing as priests those with physical defects. The requirement that priests marry only virgins was an educational device by which they learned to take no chances of defiling their spiritual purity by intimate contact with spiritually impure associates.

Because of their *cultural and tribal nature*, and *specific* application of these laws *to Israel* for purpose of preserving *their* national distinction, we must not read *any one* of them as God's intention for anyone outside Israel.

Several OT texts, (Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Deut. 23:17f; 1 Kg. 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kg. 23:7 and Job 36:14), either implicitly disapprove of or explicitly prohibit male cult prostitution, which *may or may not* have involved homosexual acts. In each of these texts, except the two from Leviticus, the noun for male cult prostitute is found. It is very likely that with these two Levitical texts male cult prostitution is also intended. The reason for this is that contextually, Lev. 18:22, ("*you shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination*"), is set between a prohibition of child sacrifice to Molech, (cf. 1 Kg. 11:7), and the rule against bestiality in 18:23. The rule against bestiality is traceable to the Egyptian ram-worship cult, whose worship included sexual copulation with goats. Thus on both sides, Lev. 18:22 is enclosed by prohibitions against pagan worship. S.R. Driver, (*Deuteronomy*, p. 264) and Von Rad, (*Genesis*, p. 217), discuss cultic prostitution, linking Lev. 18:22 with Deut. 23:17f. Both of these renowned expositors conclude that Lev. 18:22 and 20:13, though general in its wording, is aimed probably at the same practice. Norman Snaith does not hesitate to say of Lev. 18:22, that "*homosexuality here is condemned on account of its association with idolatry,*" (*The Century Bible, Leviticus*, p. 126, emphasis mine).

The word "abomination" occurs six times in the "Holiness Code," and nowhere else in Leviticus. All six occurrences are confined to Lev. 18 and 20, relating strictly to sexual purity. From our study above on the meaning of "abomination" as referring primarily to idolatry in Ezekiel, it is understandable that Snaith says this about this word in Lev. 18:22: "*Usually this word to'ebah has to do with idolatrous actions, actions connected with the cults of other gods,*" (*Leviticus and Numbers*, p. 126). Other features of Levitical separateness make more sense to us if we view them in the same light. For example, the wild pig, according to the Ras Shamra texts, was holy to the Baal cult, therefore it is prohibited in

Lev. 11:7 and Deut. 14:8. Prohibition of eating pork makes more sense in this connection than on the supposition that there is something *unhealthy* about eating the meat. It also helps explain why Jesus eliminated such food restrictions once they had served their national, Israelite-specific purpose. In the same vein the connection of male cultic prostitution with homosexuality in the Levitical texts, places them in the same category with the other prohibitions that no longer have any force. In other words, the "homosexuality" forbidden here is homosexuality offered in worship to pagan gods. The Bible also condemns heterosexuality used in worship to pagan gods. The wrong use of either sexual orientation does not negate its right use.

All Bible scholars understand that this code is not meant for application to all cultures for all time. No modern church practices this code, but understands its prescription to be uniquely applicable to the Jewish religion, in its specific cultural/religious setting. The only part of this entire code that anyone emphasizes today is the prohibition against male homosexuality. Thus this prohibition is lifted out from all the rest, given special treatment and made to endure forever, while all the rest is discarded or given slight notice at best. Can this possibly be fair treatment of the Biblical text?

We all might desire direct and specific guidance from God for all sex issues, but Scripture does not propose such guidance, in spite of prevailing notions to the contrary. The Scriptures are in fact *not uniform* in the sexual moralities it either condones or condemns. Scripture contains Divine endorsements of sexual practices that most of us now reject: e.g. women as men's sexual *property*; polygamy and concubinage; Levirate marriage; prostitution (yes, the Bible accepts the validity of prostitution!). But we reject these practices even though God endorsed them. Scripture prohibits intercourse during menstruation and attaches spiritual "uncleanness" to menstrual blood and semen. But we refuse to attach any negativity to these things in spite of what the Bible says. Therefore for us to take from such a context the singular sexual practice of homosexuality and treat it in ways we treat none of the others demonstrates intellectual, spiritual and theological dishonesty, and special pleading. We merely *imagine* that the Holiness Code provides specific directions prohibiting

homosexuality. It no more does that than it provides specific direction for us as to how to sow our fields or sew our clothes.

The context of the prohibitions in Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 suggest that what is opposed is not same-sex activity apart from pagan cultism, as in our modern sense, but same-sex activity practiced within the Canaanite cult *as part of idolatrous fertility worship*. Intercourse with the cult prostitute as representative of the deity was supposed to effect, in a supernatural way, the divine cosmic mystery of reproduction and fruit bearing among humans, crops and animals. It is this *connection with idolatry* that brings God's wrath against *both homosexual and heterosexual* cult prostitution. It is this *connection with idolatry* that is an "*abomination*." Nothing *inherent* in either homosexual or heterosexual sexual orientation accounts for this condemnation. Homosexual orientation is no more condemned by these Scriptures opposing cult prostitution, than is heterosexual orientation condemned by them. It is thus apparent that all notions of "purity" contained in this Levitical code are *culturally conditioned*. Each prohibition is clearly designated and its attendant penalty prescribed. Yet we rightfully reject virtually all of these prohibitions and penalties except one.

Another question we must answer with absolute honesty is: Why should the qualifications for priesthood be made secondary to the issue of homosexuality? If the prohibition against homosexuality is forever binding, why not also the qualification for priests? If we insist that homosexuality is damned on the basis of this code, then why do we not also require that our church leaders conform to its regulations of priestly qualifications?

And why do we decide that the *laws* apply but not the *penalty*? Do we honor God's prohibition against homosexuality if we do not demand the death penalty? And how do we honestly discard all other prohibitions while keeping that *one* relating to homosexuals; did God put one universal/cross-cultural law in the midst of a large number of temporary, culture-specific laws, and then not tell us about it? What rule of acceptable Biblical exegesis allows us to pluck one command out of all the rest and treat that one command in a way *directly opposite* to the way we treat all the rest? We suspect that the primary reason we do this with Lev. 18:22 is because this is the only place in the whole Bible where one can find what *appears* to be an outright prohibition against homosexuality. All other Biblical references to this practice are sufficiently ambiguous as to

present real problems to those who wish to universally ban homosexual practice of any sort. We suspect that loathing of homosexual orientation comes *first* and the search for Bible proof that it is evil comes *second*. Even though this is a common phenomenon, no Bible student thinks they are guilty of such. But human frailty is such that even the best of us are subject to the error of searching for “proof-texts” that substantiate our perspective, rather than just objectively studying to find what the Bible actually says and being satisfied with that. Too many of us have something to prove to our associates and too much to lose if we embrace certain ideas. Homosexuality is such an explosive issue that few people can objectively study the issue. Yet objectivity is the only hope we have for making honest and loving conclusions about this practice and the people who are engaged in it.

We suggest then, that the fundamental character and purpose of the prohibitions in the Holiness Code, is as “boundary definers.” The framework of cultic notions of purity and defilement, and their exclusively male orientation, severely limits, if not outright eliminates their usefulness for universal sexual morals. These OT prohibitions of homosexual acts may not be understood as timeless, cross-cultural decrees that can be applied to contemporary situations on the assumption of exact correspondence. The language and contexts of these prohibitions demonstrate a world-view and a theology that is inconceivable and unacceptable to modern Christians. The theological issues that govern the introduction of homosexual prohibitions into the Biblical text are issues of cultic purity and defilement, of posterity and land. These notions place sexual practices with a menstruating wife, sowing fields with different kinds of seeds, and child sacrifice to idols, in the same category as homosexual activities.

Surely we can think more clearly through these facts than we heretofore have done. Sincere, unbiased truth seeking demands a consideration of these matters that is consistent with integrity in Biblical exegesis. No special pleading can be allowed. We must be *able* and *willing* to accept what we find whether we like it or not. If mind-sets must yield to newfound truth, so be it. Isn't that the reason we are all engaged in Bible study anyway?

In spite of the modern church's avowed commitment to “the word of truth” and to “textual integrity,” the church has historically made decisions about many ethical matters apart from

the letter of the law. As the church has confronted new situations and learned new truth it has changed its mind on many issues. We understand that the “dietary” laws no longer apply to us. We ordain people who have physical defects and who cut their hair and shave their faces. On the other side of the coin there are some practices which the Bible plainly *permits* – like polygamy and concubinage – or even *commands* – like Levirate marriage – that we completely reject! And there are practices that the Bible *forbids* – like divorce, and remarriage after divorce – which we feel compelled to reconsider on the basis of more learning and observation of the human predicament. We must cease to simply quote texts when faced with difficult situations. We must do our best to *understand* the texts we quote, linguistically, historically and culturally, and be sure we are applying those texts *properly* to our situation.

Consider for example, the case of the Levirate marriage, (Deut. 25:5-10). God’s law requires that if a man dies without a male heir his widow cannot marry outside the family. In order to ensure that *his children inherit his land, his wife* must be impregnated by *his brother*, (or failing that, another close kinsman). This law is transparently clear and it is absolute. *Yet no one practices it today!* We reject this law because we understand that it is Israel-specific. In the same spirit, we must admit that even if what the holiness code says about homosexual acts is absolutely clear, we are obligated to apply the same “larger theological insights” in our determination of any present applicability of those prohibitions. Surely, if we look at all the other restrictions and decide that *most* of them are not applicable to us, then we must study long and hard before we decide that this one prohibition out of all the rest, is obligatory today.

Even when a “law” is properly interpreted in its cultural, historical and linguistic setting and found to be fully applicable to our situation, there is yet another question we must ask. “Does this law need to be honored *in its letter*, or should we by-pass the letter in the name of humane care for people?” This is not an attempt to by-pass Divine legislation. It is a concern drawn from both OT and NT precedent. The words of Jesus in texts like Matt. 12:1-7, and those of Micah, in Mic. 6:6-8, speak directly to this issue.

David and his men, while fleeing from Saul, arrived at Nob hungry and tired, (1 Sam. 21 – 22). The only food available was the “holy bread” in the temple. The established “holiness code”

prohibited any persons but consecrated priests from eating this bread, (Lev. 24:5-9). David and all his men were, on the basis of *the letter of the law*, disqualified from eating this bread. Yet the attending priest gave them the bread. Jesus cites this story in *defense* of his disciple's plucking grain on the Sabbath, in violation of the letter of the law, (Matt. 12:1-8; Mk. 2:23-27; Lk. 6:1-5). Jesus then made a bold theological statement: "*the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath,*" (Mk. 2:27-28). In His *action*, in His *statement*, and in His use of *David's example*, Jesus demonstrated that God's concern in OT time and in NT time, was not serving "the letter of the law" but rather serving the good of man. We have Jesus' "Lordship" declaration as proof that the "letter of the law" is *subservient* to actual human need. For David in the OT, and for Jesus in the NT, human need provides the Divine interpretive key for understanding legal codes. Human need and "love for our neighbor" provides the key for deciding how, when or whether we must honor the letter of the law. We have David's example and Jesus' example and teaching to set the focus for us.

Another NT setting that gives valuable insight is Peter's "heavenly sheet" vision, (Acts 10). The sheet contained many "unclean" animals yet the Lord commands him to "*kill and eat.*" The letter of the law *forbade* Peter to obey so he refuses the command twice, but relents and finally obeys only after the heavenly voice says that God has somehow "cleansed" these animals. The dietary laws in Israel's holiness code were a large part of what *defined* the Jewish religion. Yet now God says they are no longer applicable. Peter draws a bold theological conclusion: "*God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean,*" (Acts 10:28). The significance of this for our study is dramatic. What God considered "unholy" or "unclean" under the Jewish dispensation does not necessarily have *anything* to do with morality or ethics. *Everything* contained in the holiness code of Leviticus may very well be as transitory and temporary as we understand to be the case with animal sacrifices. Indeed we do understand this of all those codes *except* the one dealing with homosexuality. On God's authority we are taught by Peter's experience that God did not give the dietary laws out of concern for the *inherent morality* of eating certain kinds of meat. In fact the spiritual application drawn by Peter shows that even in the dietary laws God was trying to teach us something

about our *humanity*. God's concern was not strict cultic or moral "purity." God's concern was with the good of man and man's proper relationship with each other and with God. The Gospel demands that we come to God's law with new insight and with humanitarian concern *uppermost* in our interpretive methodology. Specifically, Christians must not interpret and follow any laws without asking about how those laws harmonize with God's grace manifested in Jesus Christ. And if *Peter* must "*not call any man common or unclean,*" what does this teach *us* about thus labeling homosexuals and prostitutes for example? What does grace and love teach us on this issue? Are we *absolutely positive*, after truly doing our *very best* to find *what* God is *actually prohibiting*, and *why*, that God has condemned all same-sex relations for all time? Integrity before God and love for man absolutely demands that we be convinced "beyond reasonable doubt," before we judge other humans "common or unclean" on the basis of their same-sex orientation.

The bottom line of honest Biblical exegesis is this:

[1] It is neither honest nor conscientious to simply state: "that is what the Bible says and I believe exactly what it says." The Bible *always* requires *interpretation*. The New Testament makes very clear the confrontations between Jesus and the Jewish leaders in debate over the *interpretation* of the Old Testament. Jesus and the Pharisees read and quoted the same OT verses. But they differed in *understanding* those verses. We must be very sure that we *understand* the verses we quote, lest we be found on the same side as the Pharisees, thus on the wrong side of Jesus! The "church" leaders in the first century thought Jesus was a heretic because He disputed their understanding of OT theology. Is it, do you think, at least *minimally possible* that Jesus might tell us today: "You have heard that it was said by them of old time, that homosexuality is in all cases forbidden. But I say unto you..."??? We are no more certain of our position on this issue than were the Pharisees certain of their positions. Yet they were dreadfully wrong in almost every case. If we believe ourselves to be fallible, we will hold even homosexuality open to ongoing study and even correction on the basis of better understanding.

[2] All Bible texts are context-bound because language itself is context-bound. Ignoring the context of any Scripture

disqualifies one from being taken seriously as a Bible expositor, and inevitably results in wrong interpretation. What then, if our interpretation of “homosexual passages” ignores their context, resulting in error?

[3] All Bible texts are likewise bound by their cultural and historical setting. Ignoring this reality has led to the exclusion of women from spiritual ministry; to promotion of slavery as “Biblically authorized”; to burning witches in Salem “in Jesus’ name”; to the wholesale rejection of basic human rights for black people, and to other terrible sins. If we ignore the cultural/historical setting of our favorite “homosexual” verses, we set ourselves up for God’s judgment as being as horribly wrong in the way we have treated homosexuals, as we were wrong in the above mentioned cases.

[4] The interpretation of Biblical texts must be *consistent*. There can be no justifiable grounds for “re-interpreting” Biblical teachings on issues like divorce, slavery, marriage or the role of women, yet insisting that Biblical teaching on homosexuality is timeless, universal, changeless and without exception. We must beware of an incipient “infallibility-complex” that calcifies us in a position that may be dreadfully wrong.

The following conclusions about the holiness code of Leviticus 17-27, we believe to be consistent with such honest Bible exegesis.

Since this entire code is *given only to Israel*, non-Israelites need not be concerned about it.

These requirements relate only to Israel’s *unique* religio-politico position in the world. Thus these laws apply not to morality and ethics as such, but to cultic and political distinctions.

Since the *majority* of these requirements are rightfully *rejected* as normative for our behavior today, consistency demands that we reject *all* of them.

Specifically, if we take the two verses forbidding “homosexuality” as binding on modern man then we cannot *with integrity*, reject all the others.

The “homosexual” prohibition of Lev. 18:22 is, consistent with its context, applicable only to such acts as are offered as worship to pagan gods, or the misuse of homosexual acts as

vehicles for humiliating, degrading and doing violence to others.

If God universally condemns homosexual orientation, that condemnation must come from other Scriptures. Inclusion in this code is not sufficient cause to prohibit homosexuality in all forms, in all cultures, for all time.

The New Testament and Homosexuality.

Since the foregoing OT evidence does not, in our estimation, provide anything definitive on the subject of consensual adult homosexuality, we turn to the NT.

As a beginning point, let us state the fact that *in the NT there is neither explicit command nor outright prohibition against homosexuality*. This, in and of itself, is not *determinative*. But it is of *consequence* if we should find that there are no NT passages that *unambiguously* categorize homosexuality as sin. We have shown that the OT simply does not address homosexuality *as such*. Its references to homosexual *acts* are all related either *specifically* to violent rape and exploitation, or *contextually* to idol worship. Since none of those qualifiers apply to adult consensual homosexual orientation then they are *not determinative* in prohibiting it. Just to keep our thinking straight, we repeat this comparison: there are many references to *heterosexual acts* that relate either specifically to violent rape and exploitation, or contextually to idol worship. Since none of those qualifiers apply to adult consensual *heterosexual* orientation then they are *not determinative* in prohibiting it. So our position seems clear enough: We do not find direct prohibition of consensual homosexual orientation in the OT. If we fail also to find direct prohibition of homosexuality in the NT, then our conclusion is *obvious* and *necessary*: i.e. The Bible does not condemn homosexuality as a consensual adult sexual orientation. And if neither OT nor NT prohibits such, then it is allowable for those who choose it. We find three NT texts that *appear* to place homosexuality in prohibited status.

Romans 1:24-27.

God abandoned a segment of humanity to, "*sexual impurity and degrading their bodies with one another*" (NIV), to degrading passions and to "*unnatural acts.*" We have been trained to believe these are *homosexual acts*. Once that thought is put into our minds it is easy to read these verses as transparent condemnations of homosexuality. They may indeed be just that. But the necessity for honest exegesis compels us to *prove* the proposition rather than just taking it for granted from a superficial reading. Again our task is very simple. We must discover what the words of our text actually *mean*. This

discovery is made by [1 Correctly *defining* the words; and [2 Correctly *interpreting* the words *in their context*.

Firstly, there is no word in this text that means “homosexual.” And there is nothing in the words “*lust*,” “*impurity*,” or “*dishonor*” that has anything inherently to do with homosexuality. Those words are used over and over in specific reference to heterosexual sin. Thus their occurrence in Rom. 1 cannot automatically refer to “homosexuality.”

The word “*exchange*,” (vs. 25, 26) comes from the Greek, *metallasso*, which means “To exchange, alter, substitute.” (The Complete Biblical Library, Greek-English Dictionary, (word # 3207). Continuing in its explanation of this word, the author says,

“...The root verb *allasso* is used several times to denote a fundamental or elemental change, as in 1 Cor. 15:51, where the thorough change in the body of the believer at Christ’s coming is discussed. In Heb. 1:12, *allasso* is used to describe the fundamental change to be made in the heavens at the destruction of the world.

Metallasso, in contrast to *allasso*, is an intensive compound meaning “to exchange” one thing for another. Rom. 1:25 notes the “exchange” of the truth of God for a lie. In Rom. 1:26 women “exchange” natural sexual relationships for that which is not according to nature...”

Kittel’s Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament, defines *metallasso* this way: “To change,” “to exchange.” In Rom. 1:25, God’s truth, i.e. His self-revelation, (1:18ff.), is “changed” into a lie, i.e. the idolatry that sets other things in place of God. This leads in Rom. 1:26 to the “exchanging” of natural relations for unnatural; this sexual perversion is the consequence of the religious perversion.”

The Greek word translated “degrading” in Rom. 1:26, is *atimias*. It’s Biblical usage is discussed as follows in The Complete Biblical Library, Greek-English Dictionary, (word # 813).

“...The principal terms (in the Septuagint, D.C.) translated by *atimia*, include *qalon*, “shame, dishonor...”

“...*Atimia* appears only in Paul’s writings. In his corpus, it is restricted to Rom. 1:26; 9:21, 1 Cor. 11:14; 15:43; 2 Cor. 6:8; 11:21; 2 Tim. 2:20. *Atimia* ranges in definition from simple

“embarrassment,” (1 Cor. 11:14, cf. 2 Cor. 6:8; 11:21), to an “ordinary” or “base position,” (of vessels that are “ignoble,” RSV, 2 Tim. 2:20); cf. Rom. 39:21.

“Sinful” men “disgrace” (*atimazo*) their bodies, (Rom. 1:24), by succumbing to “disgraceful” (*atimia*) passions, (Rom. 1:26). Here the idea exceeds mere social embarrassment and moves to “shameful” behavior that is totally unacceptable to God.”

The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament, defines *atimia* and its relatives this way:

“*Atimadzo*: to dishonor, to slight, to treat with indignity, to abuse, debase.”

“*Atimao*: to dishonor, outrage, treat shamefully.”

“*Atimia*: dishonor, infamy, shame, meanness, vileness, a dishonorable use, slighting, disparagingly.”

“*Atimos*: unhonored, without honor, despised.”

Discussing the word “natural,” in Rom. 1:26, (Gr. *phusiken*), these comments come from The Complete Biblical Library, Greek-English Dictionary, (word # 5282).

“*Phusikos* is the adjectival form of the noun *phusis*...“nature” *Phusis* had to do with the constitution of something – what a thing really is. *Phusikos* refers to that which is natural – inherent to an object...”

Phusikos appears three times in the New Testament. In 2 Pet. 2:12 the Apostle described apostate men as “unreasoning animals,” born as “natural” (*phusika*) creatures. From this it appears that the behavior of animals is *phusikos* behavior – they behave in a “natural” way. Men are to have mental and spiritual faculties that differentiate them from the unreasoning beasts.

In Rom. 1:26, 27 Paul used *phusikos* in the context of sexual relations. It is unnatural – contrary to the basic inborn nature of man – for men and women to engage in homosexual practices. It is important to remember though, that to Paul what is “natural” is that “which is in accordance with the intentions of the Creator,” not merely the product of chance evolutionary factors. Thus the view that understands homosexuality as the product of prebirth hormonal influences is clearly contrary to Scripture...Heterosexuality is “natural” – an inborn quality generated by the Creator.”

Natural Versus Unnatural

It seems necessary to comment on the above, that “natural” versus “unnatural” as relates to the above text, *is not defined by Scripture as “heterosexuality versus homosexuality.”* The words *themselves* do not *mean* this but rather indicate that “unnatural” versus “natural” has to do with *a specific sex act itself*, rather than the sexual orientation of the persons who commit the act. Either heterosexuals or homosexuals could commit the “unnatural” act. The exact language of the Greek text requires that we consider *the act itself* to be “unnatural.” Such a statement as, *“It is unnatural – contrary to the basic inborn nature of man – for men and women to engage in homosexual practices. ...Heterosexuality is “natural” – an inborn quality generated by the Creator,”* does not come from the text here, or anywhere else in Scripture. It derives purely from *pre-conception*. It is a bias *placed upon* the text rather than *reading it from* the text. It comes from a *misreading* of this and other texts. If it is true that homosexuality is *inherently* “unnatural” that fact must necessarily be derived from Scriptures that make such a statement *overtly*, which no Scripture does. It is dishonest exegesis to first adopt an opinion then allow that opinion to serve as the foundation upon which exegesis is built.

All talk about what is “natural” deserves to come under the same amount of automatic caution we exercise when considering other religious “hot button” terms. This word has been historically used in cultural and religious power structures as the basis for the “Divine Right of Kings,” male-exclusive church leadership, male centered matrimonial customs, short hair for men and long hair for women, superiority of whites over blacks, superiority of Germans over all other races, and so forth. If we *begin* with the premise that “homosexuality is unnatural” we make discussion fruitless for advancing moral insight. Most of the current discussion of homosexuality is devoted to whether homosexuals are “unnatural” and if so, in what sense. It is the nature of communities to encourage behavior that produces circumstances desirable to the community and to discourage behavior that the community finds likely to hinder desirable circumstances. What is “natural” and “normal” may signify only what is *customary* in a given community. The appeal to what is “natural” often conceals the imposition of customs that disregard the interests of some to the advantage of others. There is no empirical evidence that suggests a

direct link between what a culture finds to be “desirable” and what is therefore “natural.” For this reason no *legitimate* conclusions can be drawn on the sole basis of a comparison of “natural” with “unnatural.” Those arguments center on nothing more substantial than merely human opinion. Unless *defined* by the objective standard of Scripture, opinions of what are “natural/unnatural” will *inevitably* vary according to the cultural predisposition of the one doing the reasoning. Therefore any attempt to arrive at truth will be frustrated unless we confine our conclusions to what Scripture actually says. If Scripture does not *specify* the exact *nature* of what is “natural/unnatural” then we are required to let it go at that. We can have any *opinion* we like in that case. But we cannot *honestly* draw conclusions that attempt to establish Divine law, in any case where Scripture is not definitive.

Thus the first emphatic point we must make about what is “natural” in this text is: “No Scripture says ‘homosexuality is unnatural’; and no Scripture says ‘heterosexuality is natural.’” This is simple fact. Any novice Bible student can prove this by simply searching diligently through their favorite concordance. Such a statement is simply not there. Therefore any conclusion we make as to the “naturalness” of homosexuality holds no more authority than any other purely human opinion. In the case of Rom. 1, we are helped greatly by other Pauline occurrences of this word.

When we consider Paul’s other uses of this word, it becomes clear that his reference to what is “natural/unnatural” is altogether culturally conditioned. This is illustrated by examining 1 Cor. 11:14-15. Here Paul deals with certain cultural distinctions between men and women, using the same Greek word for “nature” and “unnatural” as we find in Rom. 1:26, 27. He says “*Does not even nature (phusis) itself teach you that if a man has long hair it is a dishonor (or “shameful”, Gr. atimia, cf. above definitions) to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her?*” For Paul, it is simply “unnatural” for men to have long hair and “unnatural” for women to have short hair. That view prevailed in Paul’s Greco-Roman cultural setting and had special significance for his first century, Greco-Roman audience. Does anyone today believe this text establishes the *necessity* for men to cut their hair short and for women to not cut theirs? None but legalistic sects. The reason is obvious: our culture does not hold it to be “natural” for men to have short hair or for women to have long hair. But isn’t this the

same issue we have with Rom.1:26, 27? We are no more justified in using Rom. 1:26 to declare something *presently* “unnatural” than we are in using 1 Cor. 11:14,15 to declare that it is “unnatural” for men in our culture to grow long hair or women to cut their hair short. Likewise, the word “shameful” (*atimia*) is used in both texts. Its use in 1 Cor. 11:14 proves undeniably that “shameful” has no inherent connection to sexual sin, homosexual or otherwise. If we force Rom.1:26, 27 altogether into a present-day application, we are honor bound to do the same with 1 Cor. 11:14,15. We are *exegetically dishonest* if we disregard the historical and cultural context out of which the Bible arises. That kind of “study” is one reason people are “*always learning, but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth,*” (2 Tim. 3:7).

Connected with the issue of what is “unnatural” is Paul’s declaration in Gal. 3:28 of the end of distinctions between male and female. Many debates occur on the implication of this statement for woman’s rights in the church. Little attention is given to its implications for the issue of homosexuality. Paul was totally convinced that “*in Christ*” there is no distinction between men and women. By saying that in Christ “*there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female,*” Paul destroyed the bastions of religious and cultural separation based on physical, sexual, circumstantial, political and economic differences. Separation between races, social groups and men and women no longer existed in the saved community. Thus any view of things “natural/unnatural” that revolved specifically around gender distinctions, became void for Christians.

“In Christ” is the spiritual location of all saved ones, at every moment of every day and night. It cannot be restricted to “the church.” It is now the orientation of the total life. Saved ones may no longer make distinctions on the basis of gender or of sexual orientation alone. Women cannot legitimately be kept out of leadership in the church because to do so requires that we make a distinction between men and women, thus denying the effect of the gospel. And we can not disallow salvation and church membership to the homosexual because to do so is to argue against the removal of sexual distinctions. In the “flesh” there is male and female, and sexual activity is an integral part of our physical life. But in Christ those things are not matters of holiness, spirituality or of separation

from others because the faith we all share in the risen Lord makes us "*all one in Christ Jesus.*"

We remind you: we are dealing with *Paul's usage* of "natural/unnatural." What is determinative, is not what *we* consider to be "natural" or "unnatural." In this case, what we think is of absolutely no consequence whatsoever. What matters supremely is the way Paul used these words. As he used them, these words have nothing to do with sexual orientation and they have nothing to do with establishing sin or defining divine law. Paul uses them to denote *cultural* distinctions.

God's and Paul's denunciation refers to that which is *inherently* degrading and filthy. Since there is nothing *inherently* degrading in the "normal" caressing of the various sexual parts of the body by either men or women, it seems apparent to us that what is involved is the *inherently* degrading acts of worshipping idols and exploiting vulnerable people. Remember that OT Scripture uses the word "abomination" of both activities.

This conclusion is confirmed when we consider the immediate context of Rom. 1:24-27. Paul began this section at verse 18, where he says God's wrath is poured out against those who are evil. He specifies that evil as rejecting God's self-revelation, (vs. 19, 20), refusing to honor God or thank Him, (vs. 21a), with the result that they became fools, and turning from the True God to worship idols, (vs. 21b-23). God "*gave them up*" to dishonor their bodies because they "*worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator,*" (vs. 24-25). Flowing directly from that statement into our text, he repeats "*For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions...*"

Contextually, Paul sets the same stage as does Ezekiel. His *language* is much the same, his *condemnations* are the same and his *examples* are the same. Both Paul and Ezekiel are concerned not with the inherently sinful nature of the acts they condemn. They are concerned about the performance of any act as worship to idols, or any act that violates the welfare and rights of others. The whole context of both writers has to do with pagan worship and violence to fellow man. Thus Paul goes immediately from his talk of women and men doing what is "unnatural" and "degrading" to further illustrate their sin with such specifics as, "*unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, slander, God-hatred, insolence, arrogance, boastfulness, inventing evil, disobedience to parents, ignorance, untrustworthiness, unloving,*

unmerciful," (Rom. 1:28-31). Those are the same kinds of things Ezekiel and other prophets condemned as being the fruit and proof of commitment to false gods.

To us the conclusion seems inescapable. Paul, like Ezekiel, condemns the "unnatural" act of abandoning true worship of God and using sex in worship of idols, and pursuing such treatment of others as degraded them through exploitation and violence. The specific forms of this degradation and violence were *both heterosexual and homosexual prostitution* in pagan temples, and as we shall show, the sexual exploitation of young boys by adult males. The name for this behavior is "pederasty." It was indeed homosexual in orientation. But what made the act evil and "degrading" was its exploitation of vulnerable, young boys, sometimes with violence. If heterosexuals exploit young people it is equally "degrading" and evil. Thus sexual orientation is not the issue here. The issue is the unloving and inconsiderate treatment of others, especially of vulnerable and mostly defenseless children.

In Rom. 1:26, 27, the comparison between the conduct of men and women is that they were given over to their "*degrading passions,*" the women exchanging the "*natural function for the unnatural*" and the men "*in similar fashion*" doing this "*unnatural*" thing with other men. In view of our preceding study it seems plausible to rephrase these verses this way:

"Because they abandoned God and turned to idols, God abandoned them to their degrading passion. The women abandoned the natural act of loving, consensual sex, in exchange for the unnatural acts of cultic prostitution and sexual exploitation of children. In the same way men rejected the natural act of loving, consensual sex, preferring the unnatural and indecent act of homosexual idol worship, including exploitation of children. All such sinners received in their persons the due penalty of their sins."

More On Cultural Setting

Research of first century materials is revealing on then-current usage of "natural" and "unnatural." These materials help us understand what Bible writers meant by using these words to communicate to those people. Consider the following:

Plato's Laws:

Plato's Laws uses the expression "contrary to nature" in the same form that it appears in Rom. 1:26, to describe same-sex activity, (*Laws* 636c, 841d). But it is especially significant that Plato had in mind the specific practice of *pederasty* – sex between an older male and a pre-pubescent boy.

Philo:

Philo is fully conversant with normal Greco-Roman views of pederasty. He is appalled especially by the feminization of the youth involved, which he viewed as "unnatural." The damage done to the exploited adolescent, is both his feminization, and his use as a sex object. What Greco-Roman society took for granted in the politics of sex, was the right of the adult male to penetrate not only a wife but also male and female slaves or a young male favorite. A few better thinkers, like Philo, criticized such latter acts as being demeaning to the victims and "against nature."

"Using" another person:

On the word "use," (Rom. 1:26), Greek word *chresin*, The Complete Biblical Library, Greek-English Dictionary, (word # 5375), says this:

"Use, employment, function... Most enlightening for New Testament meaning are Aristotle's and Polybius' usages where *chresis* is "intimacy" or "acquaintance;" and Isocrates...where literally *hai oikoi chresis*, "the use of houses," means practically sexual "intercourse" with women.

The Pauline use of *chresis*, (Rom. 1:26, 27), conveys the idea of physical intimacy; but it is the "employment" or "use" of sexuality, (Rom. 1:26). The wrong use of sexuality is "against nature," (1:26), for it violates the original intention...

This shameful "use," (1:27), dishonors the body, (1:24), and has a present and recognizable "penalty" attached to it, (1:27). It is the direct result of man hardening his heart toward God, (1:20-25, 28); the individual who practices such things comes under His direct judgment, (1:18, 32). Such judgment is evident in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, (Gen. 19:1-29)."

We observe that the basic idea of the word *chresis*, is that it relates primarily not to an act carried out in mutual sexual

relations, but is the activity of the desiring subject, usually male, performed *upon* the desired object, female or male. Thus a husband “uses” his wife for sexual pleasure, and a man “uses” a young boy in pederasty. The Greek philosopher Aristippus says, “The wise man will use (*chresesthai*) boys openly and without any regard to circumstance,” (in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 2.99). Pederasty was spoken of as “*using* the male as a woman.” The problem addressed by this word in first century culture, illuminates what Paul is concerned with. The word itself, and Paul’s use of it, is not gender-relative. Rather, the problem lies in the psychological and social significance of the act for the subject of sexual desire. In “*chresin*,” one *uses* another person as one would *use* an inanimate object; without concern for their personal welfare or benefit. Sexual activity in this context is strictly manipulative, serving the dominant person’s singular lust. Paul’s purpose is not so much to condemn homosexuality as it is to highlight sexual passion that reaches beyond loving consideration for the personhood and well-being of another, becoming a purely selfish, ignominious act of exploitation. Thus we observe that it is not provable that Rom. 1:26, 27 deals with homosexuality as a consensual orientation. But Scripture does condemn all homosexual *acts* that hurt other people through manipulation, exploitation and rape, and all homosexual *acts* that dishonor God as acts of idolatry.

Pederasty in Greco-Roman Culture

We learn from research of the first century culture, that what “homosexuality” existed took a very specific form. It is named “pederasty” which literally means, “love of boys.” This was a relationship between an older male and a very young, usually pre-pubescent boy. The pervasiveness of pederasty is reflected in the education of youth in Greco-Roman society. Male youths were required to exercise regularly in the gymnasium to create a strong and beautiful body. They exercised in the nude. Nudity does not itself provoke sexual excitement, but that it could do so is reflected in Athenian law as described by Aeschines, the 4th century A.D. public orator. He said the schools were closed during hours of darkness so that darkness may not hide sexual encounters. To lessen the possibility of seduction and manipulation, older males were not permitted in the school. The dancing teacher was required to be over forty years old “in order that he may have reached the

most temperate time of life before he comes into contact with your children." Slave attendants were used to guard the youths from sexual advances while going to and from school, and even the slaves required careful control, (cf. Aeschines, *Against Timarchus* 10).

Greco-Roman homosexual culture had a background and a set of patterns completely different from ours. The practice of pederasty emerged out of the male-dominant culture of the day. In some cases pederastic relations were actually extolled. In a few cases, condemned. But in most cases, at least condoned. There was no need to be "in the closet" about pederastic practices. It was so common that many adult pederasts were married and carried on pederastic practice "on the side." Homosexuality as we know it, as a relationship between consenting, loving, committed adults, was not a matter of concern to them. The homosexuality of ancient times was the violent, exploitative, idol worshipping kind. It was this sinful *use* of homosexuality that the Bible condemns, in the same way the Bible condemns the sinful *use* of heterosexuality.

Much of this form of same-sex contact involved an adult male who had in some fashion come to have power over a youth and used this power for selfish sexual gratification. Perhaps through unfortunate economic conditions a youth was "given" to an adult in return for monetary consideration. It was not uncommon for adults to buy children and use them as slaves. In pederastic relations involving such forced sexual slavery the benefit of the youth was not even considered. The adult obtained sexual release by "using" the youth in exploitative fashion, while the needs of the youth, sexually and otherwise, were disregarded.

On the other hand, a pederastic relationship might be mutual in the sense of both parties more or less consenting to it. The older adult was the active partner, the *erastes* (lover), usually seeking out the relationship, provoking the sexual contact and obtaining orgasm by use of the boy. The younger boy was the passive partner and was called the *eromenos*, (the beloved). The *eromenos* did not expect sexual gratification by the *erastes*. In fact if the youth did feel pleasure he was considered no better than a prostitute. He was generally given no opportunity to be satisfied. His bodily activity was simply a device to provide sexual satisfaction for his lover.

The younger the boy the better. The more he looked like a woman, the more desirable he was. Thus boys were prized who

had not yet developed pubic hair or facial hair. Once hair began to appear and more manly features developed, the youth became less attractive to the adult. Such youths were commonly and easily discarded and replaced by another pre-pubescent boy.

The essence of pederasty in terms of relationships was gross *inequality*. The older active partner enjoyed orgasm with the youth's body, but did not reciprocate. The adult exerted the forces of strength and maturity upon the youth who was used strictly as a sex object. And the adults moved from youth to youth whenever they felt the youth was no longer a desirable sex object. The youth had no choice in the matter. Much hurt was endured by these exploited youths. Their person-hood was secondary to their bodily attractiveness. This entire process, in every part, contributed to the dehumanization and humiliation of the youth.

In cases of forced pederasty upon slaves, there were brothel houses filled with young boys whose entire existence was devoted to this practice. It was not uncommon to castrate beautiful youths in order to prolong their youthful appearance and therefore their usefulness as sex objects. The most famous case was Nero's castration of his slave-boy, Sporus. He dressed this boy in women's clothes, gave him a woman's name, then married him.

Evidence such as the above shows clearly that *pederasty* was the form of homosexuality known in Paul's day. It is also factual that homosexuality as we know it today was not addressed in that early society, evidently because it was not considered to be in any way "unnatural" or sinful.

The significance of this finding must be stressed. In our day, we hear regular reports from the news media that adults, generally males, have molested children in various ways. Sometimes these children are kidnapped, used for sexual purposes, then either killed or released. Sometimes an adult will fondle a child in a public place, or lure them into a secluded area where they can molest them. Sometimes the adult is a trusted family friend. Sometimes a teacher will use one or more of his/her students sexually. Sometimes a couple will adopt children in order to use them sexually. These are such frequent occurrences that we are all well aware of them. We all agree that such use of children is horrible, and we agree with the laws that inveigh against this practice. Now suppose that it was legal in our country for adults to sexually use children, and even own children for sexual purposes. Imagine even

further that this was a primary form of heterosexuality in our day. Though adult consenting heterosexuality would be practiced, our news media would not be interested in reporting incidences of such. Rather, we would see minor debates between those who favor adult/child sex, and those who do not, just as we see the debate raging between pro-life advocates and abortion advocates.

In such a situation, no one would think to label consenting adult heterosexuality as “sin” or “perverted.” And the opponents of adult/child heterosexuality would never think to condemn consenting adult heterosexuality. But this is what we find in NT days relative to homosexuality. What those people knew to think and write about, was pederasty. Some of them understood the manipulative and exploitative nature of pederasty and we can read their public records. This is what we find in the NT. Paul and his readers knew about pederasty in general, and of its use in idol worship. The harmful use of children by exploitative adults, and their use in pagan worship, was what Paul condemned as “unnatural.” Men and women turned from the “natural” use of adult consenting sex, to the practice of pederasty, and this was condemned. Given this scenario, it is as illegitimate to condemn homosexuality per se, as it would be for moderns to condemn heterosexuality on the basis of its “unnatural” use by child predators. Again, we must put ourselves in the shoes of the first century readers and writers, and limit our conclusions to what is required by what we know about their culture. No Bible writer condemned homosexuality per se, because it is not exploitative, manipulative or otherwise harmful to the practitioners.

The Early Records Of Palestinian And Hellenistic Judaism.

The Jews translated their Scripture into local languages: *Aramaic* for the Palestinian Jews, and *Greek* for the Hellenistic Jews. The Palestinian translations are called *Targums*, and the Hellenistic translation was called the *Septuagint* (LXX). Any translation inevitably becomes at least partially an interpretation because of the tendency to express the original language in a form that meets the needs of the culture receiving the translation. By studying these translations we can learn how the OT was interpreted in Judaism in the days just prior to, during, and after the birth of the Christian

church. We also are able to examine commentaries made on these translations by religious leaders involved in explaining, teaching and applying the OT for their present day. This gives us direct insight into the thought patterns of the writers of the NT. We also learn volumes about how the populace understood certain words and phrases, and about their perception of and attitude toward a wide range of practices. This knowledge enables us to determine, often with pinpoint accuracy, exactly what Bible writers *mean* when they use words and phrases that otherwise might remain a mystery. It helps us avoid the common mistake of imposing upon their language, meanings that are common to us in our culture.

Palestinian Judaism supplies us with an immense body of legal and theological material called *Rabbinic Literature*, which defines, refines, expands and in some cases even contracts the Biblical laws. They describe a fully developed legal system sometimes directly dependent on, and sometimes independent of the Bible itself. These writings incorporate the theology, moral teachings, parables and illustrations from current life that give good insight into prevailing thought. Because these writings do not purport to establish divine law, and are written in language understood by the common people, we are able through these writings to learn what they thought when they referred to certain laws of morality and ethics, when stripped of religious pretensions.

Hellenistic Judaism is known primarily through Philo, an Alexandrian theologian, and Josephus, an historian of the Jewish people. Philo relates and integrates Greek philosophy into Jewish traditions, in theological tracts on various subjects that draw heavily from the Bible. Josephus explains Jewish history to non-Jews living after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army in 70 A.D. His history books contain many references to the Bible.

These various writings wonderfully illustrate what must have been the thought pattern of the NT writers. By comparing Paul's phraseology in Romans and Corinthians, with the same phraseology in common use on the streets of Rome and Corinth, we can come to fairly certain conclusions as to what Paul did and did not mean when he referred, for example, to what is "natural" or "unnatural." We can likewise learn exactly what he had in mind when he used words like *arsenokoites* and *malachos*. And we can therefore *know* whether translators have fairly translated these words, or if they merely imposed modern meanings upon them.

The Torah Revisited

We began this study by listing and commenting on every text of the Hebrew Bible that actually refers to some form of homosexual act. The first impression gained from that exercise is both striking and compelling. Striking, because we discover, as a *fact*, that the OT is almost completely silent about homosexuality of *any* variety. Nothing at all is said about female homosexuality, and the combined texts that deal with male homosexuality can be read in five minutes or less. Compelling, because this evidence *pushes* us, even if against our will, toward a stance of greater potential toleration of homosexuality as a consensual lifestyle. Integrity requires that we entertain seriously the thought that our preconceptions of a Biblical mandate against all forms of homosexuality may be wrong. A few additional notes about the Hebrew text should be made.

Though Deut. 23:17-18 has nothing overt to say about homosexuality per se, it does say this: "*None of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult prostitute, nor shall any of the sons of Israel be a cult prostitute. You shall not bring the hire of a harlot or the wages of a dog into the house of the Lord...both of these are an abomination to the Lord your God.*" If "*cult prostitute*" or "*dog*" actually refers to some form of homosexuality, as indicated in footnotes, it is the earliest reference to it in Scripture. It is by no means clear that "*cult prostitute*" has anything to do with either male or female homosexuality. If "*cult prostitute*" is the correct reading, there is no indication that these "*prostitutes*" performed sexually for their same sex. The words themselves do not carry any homosexual connotations. The first word for "*cult prostitute*" as applied to the "*daughters of Israel*," (vs. 17), is *q^edeshah* which means simply a "*female devotee (i.e. prostitute): harlot, whore,*" (Strong's # 6948). The second word for "*cult prostitute*" as applied to men, is *qadesh*. It is the masculine form of the previous word. It means "*sacred person, a (male) devotee (by prostitution) to licentious idolatry: sodomite, unclean,*" (Strong's # 6945). These two words are the same root, differing only in their feminine and masculine forms. If *either* of them refers to homosexuality, *both* of them do. But there is nothing *inherent* in the words that indicate homosexuality. No one translates the first phrase of vs. 17 to say, "*None of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult homosexual prostitute.*" It seems that bias alone

accounts for the addition of a homosexual connotation to the masculine form of this word. In verse 18, “dog” is from the Hebrew word *keleb*, which Strong defines: “to yelp, or else to attack; a dog; hence (by euphemism) a male prostitute: dog,” (# 3611). Again, no homosexual connotation is contained in this word. Such connotation is said to arise from “euphemism,” which may be *possible*, but is certainly not subject to *proof*. Ultimately, it makes no difference whether the words contain homosexual reference or not, since the thing being condemned is not sexual orientation but the practice of prostitution in worship of idols. We make the preceding notes to demonstrate how easily theological bias enters into otherwise responsible scholarship.

Since the purpose of “sacred” prostitution was to celebrate the idolatrous “gods” of fertility, it seems unlikely that these men and women would engage others homosexually since such acts would have no meaningful reference to fertility and reproduction. It is possible however that homosexual acts may have occurred in fertility rituals if only because the reproductive organs are brought into play. It is more likely that heterosexual prostitution prevailed, symbolizing the power of the male deity over the female womb. Whatever the case, even if these prostitutes were performing same-sex acts, this text is specifically directed to *cultic/idolatrous worship*. This renders it useless as a general indictment against homosexuality as such, just as it renders the reference to female prostitutes useless as an indictment against heterosexuality. Whether the sex acts performed were heterosexual or homosexual is irrelevant. In either case they are condemned because of their cultic connection.

In Lev. 18:22; 20:13, in the midst of the “Holiness Code” we have read this prohibition, reading it as it is actually written in the Hebrew: “*With a male you shall not lie the lyings of a woman; it is an abomination.*” This literal translation is awkward but its meaning seems clear enough: men are not to lie sexually with men *in the same way* they lie with women. Analysis of this prohibition must consider carefully the entire context of the Holiness Code, as we have shown previously. We must note also that female homosexuality is not prohibited at all. These two verses are the *sole actual legal prohibitions* of homosexual acts in the whole Bible. If homosexuality is the dreaded spiritual and social scourge we have been taught that it is, does it not seem strange that *only one*

command exists in the entire Bible? Especially in light of the *many* commands repeatedly forbidding “adultery, “fornication,” and numerous other sexual sins? And is it not even more strange that this command prohibits *only male* homosexuality, leaving the subject of female homosexuality un-addressed in the entire Bible! And still more interesting is the fact that no other Biblical text so much as *refers* to this prohibition, nor is there any story showing how this law was applied in an actual human circumstance. This is not the manner in which Scripture deals with broad-based moral laws. Indeed, the whole of Leviticus is a compilation of “case laws,” illustrating the practical application of God’s Law. All of God’s laws are illustrated in Leviticus in “case law” fashion. Yet nowhere do we find such a case law used to illustrate how to deal with same-sex relationships. This is passing strange if the sinfulness of homosexual orientation is a matter of statute law. Seeing that we believe homosexuality to be the worst sexual sin imaginable, how can we explain God’s apparent disinterest in the subject? All other sexual sins are mentioned repeatedly and illustrated with case law. But homosexuality is literally by-passed except for the one apparent prohibition in Lev. 18:22; 20:13. Don’t these facts demand a sober decision to re-examine this matter to see if we have missed something?

Life Stories. Only two Biblical stories *appear* to refer to male homosexuality: Sodom and Gomorrah, (Gen., 19), and the tale of the Levite’s concubine, (Jdg. 19). In the story of Sodom, we have demonstrated that none of the several other OT references to this incident explicitly interpret Sodom’s sin as sexual in nature and not one of them even hints at homosexuality. All such references make Sodom’s sin to be various expressions of exploitation, violence and injustice. Scripture commenting on Scripture is one of the very best ways to learn what was in the mind of the writer. Passages containing non-specific references or allusions *must* be interpreted in light of related specific passages. Conclusions drawn from *generic* passages that ignore *specific references* are *always illegitimate* conclusions.

The tale of the Levite and his concubine is likewise not held in Scripture as an example of judgment upon homosexuality. Nor is it likely that homosexuality is even a factor in this story, as we have shown. In *both* stories the focus is on *rape*. Sodom’s men *attempted*

homosexual rape of Lot's visitors, and the men of Gibeah *succeeded in heterosexual rape* of the concubine. In neither case does the story point to sexual orientation but rather points to violence and injustice. Neither can be used as prohibitions of either homosexuality or heterosexuality.

Extra Biblical Sources

Legal materials.

The Palestinian Targums, available to Paul and other NT writers, shed some light on theological concepts concerning sexual orientation. These documents do not supply a large amount of evidence regarding homosexuality but what little they provide indicates that the writers were familiar with the practice of pederasty and the *malakos*, or feminized, soft male. This points to the prevalent practice of males assuming the role of the effeminate callboy, attested to in so much of the secular documentation of that era. Thus again, the subject is not homosexuality *as a consensual orientation* but homosexual pederasty, especially as manifested in the "unnatural" feminization of the male. Distinction between the active partner and the passive partner is the one feature held in common between Jewish and Greco-Roman discussions. This means that the homosexuality opposed in NT writings is the pederasty of the Greco-Roman culture. Even the language used to oppose this practice is the same as that found in Jewish writing and the literature of the surrounding culture.

Hellenistic Jewish Writings.

In Philo's discussion of Lev. 18:22; 20:13, he says, "Much graver than the above [marriages with barren women] is another evil which has ramped its way into the cities, namely pederasty," (*Special Laws* III. 37.) The discussion that follows those words centers on pederasty and on what Philo finds disgraceful about it. It is clear that when Philo reads the general laws in the Bible against male homosexuality he is thinking about the cultural manifestation of pederasty in his own day. He distinguishes between the active and the passive partner. He pours scorn on the effeminate male, the call-boy, attacking the coiffure of hair, use of cosmetics and perfumes, the general effort to turn the male into female: the *malakos*. He labels the effeminate male *androgynous*, (lit. male-

female), and complains that they have infiltrated into the ranks of the Greek cults where they are highly honored, some of them going so far as to accept castration. It is especially significant to note that when Philo reads the Biblical laws against homosexuality, he interprets them as a reference to the expression of that act prevailing in his day – *pederasty* – in both secular form and in prostitution, especially as performed by the womanized *malakos*. It is important to remember that the language of the common man in the day when Biblical texts were written, controls our interpretation of the meaning of the language of the Biblical text. A Bible writer *would not/could not* use phrases unknown to the readers, nor would writers use common words and phrases in ways totally foreign to the reader. Those who believe the Bible to be God-inspired, must believe that the Holy Spirit put God's thoughts into the language of the common man so the common man could understand it. When we discover the manner in which the average reader of the NT or OT used certain words and phrases in everyday life, then we know how the Bible writers used those same phrases. Thus this early evidence makes it fairly certain that, because of the cultic/cultural setting of Lev. 18 and 20, the Biblical prohibition is of pederastic homosexuality, as was common to idol worship. Young boys were commonly forced to serve as homosexual prostitutes in the gates of idol temples. This interpretation conforms to the context of the whole of the "Holiness Code," rather than inexplicably departing from that context.

Paul's argument from "nature" in Rom. 1:26, 27, which was already commonplace in Greco-Roman attacks against pederasty, has nothing at all to do with theories of natural law or interpretations of the Genesis creation account. We have shown that the Greek phrase, *para phusin* – "that which is against nature" – is encountered time and again in Greco-Roman literature that deals specifically with pederasty. Paul's use of the expression "*male with male*" does not require that he had anything more in mind than pederasty, any more than Philo, who used exactly the same terminology in his specific references to pederasty, (Philo, *Contemplative Life* 59-62). It is this context that shows that Paul's phrase, "*against nature*," is a reference to *what that society considered to be "against nature,"* i.e. the sexual use by adult males of very young, feminized boys. This act was "shameful," which was a typical, negative Greek judgment on pederasty. Simply put, there

was no other form of homosexuality considered to be “shameful” in the world to which Paul wrote. Under guidance from the Holy Spirit, Paul could not have written to his culture and to the church, what they could not have understood.

In Philo’s *Special Laws* he gives two reasons for his hostility to pederasty. (1) Both the active and passive partner are acting “against nature,” (*para phusin*), using the same terms Paul uses in Rom. 1. He considers the androgynous male to be a “counterfeit coin” while the pederast pursues an unnatural pleasure. (2) He condemns the pederast for channeling his semen away from its divinely intended purpose – procreation. The pederast “does his best to render cities desolate and uninhabited by destroying the means of procreation.” He equates this with the “crime” of men mating with barren women, (cf. previous reference, par. 37-42).

In another treatise Philo mentions pederasty as a crime punishable by death, again indicating that he is thinking of pederasty when he reads the laws of Lev. 20:13, (*Hypothetica* 7.1). In his comments on Sodom and Gomorrah, Philo believes the attempt of Sodom’s men was that of *pederastic rape*, based probably on the prevailing notion that angels appeared to men as exceptionally beautiful young males, (Questions on Genesis, IV. 37). This is also the interpretation of Josephus, (Antiquities I. 200). It is not *provable* that pederasty was involved in Sodom’s crime but it is indeed *possible*.

Preliminary Summary

The evidence presented is by no means exhaustive but is highly indicative of the focus of extant Jewish literature, moving us to at least these conclusions.

1. Homosexuality in both Scripture and non-Scripture is looked upon as a strictly *male* practice. This male homosexuality is specifically described as *pederasty*.

2. Judgment is uncompromisingly negative against pederasty. Three reasons are given for this. (a) It is “against nature”; (b) It denies procreation as the divinely appointed aim of sex; (c) Pederasty is a sin peculiarly related to idolatry; either done in worship of idols or being the result of idolatrous devotion.

3. Jewish authors use general terms found in Leviticus for “male” and “female,” but it is fairly obvious that when they attack homosexual practices they are specifically attacking *male pederasty*.

4. Neither Hellenistic nor Palestinian Judaism has much interest in the subject of homosexuality. But where it surfaces, both sources are opposed to it. Both ignore female homosexuality. Both attack homosexuality as a peculiarly Gentile vice. Both see male homosexuality as specifically *pederasty*. Both ground their opposition in the Bible.

5. Pederasty was the only form of homosexuality addressed. Paul used the same words and phrases in his attack as did his contemporaries in their attacks on pederasty. What Paul attacked in Romans, 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, would be such practices and concepts as prevailed in his society and what was known to those who first read his epistles! His language, common in his day, meant only one thing to his readers: pederastic/cultic homosexuality. If he had something different in mind, none of his readers grasped it! No one questions the fact that both OT and NT writers attack homosexual *acts*. But in all cases it is crucial that we understand *exactly* what these Biblical references *actually say*, else we cannot know what these texts oppose.

Compared to the abundance of Greco-Roman literature, the NT is virtually silent on this subject. Considering the abundance of NT material addressing moral issues in general, (e.g. Rom. 1:26-32; 13:13; 1 Cor. 5:1-5; 5:9-13; 6:1-20; 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:19-22; Eph. 4:17-32; Col. 3:5-11; 1 Tim. 1:8-11), its sparse references to homosexuality and the *ambiguous* nature of even those references, makes it obvious that the NT writers were very little concerned, *if at all*, with the general practice of consensual homosexuality. At the very least we are compelled to admit that concern about homosexuality in the first century NT church is nothing at all compared to the concern expressed in our own day. The early church was not even as concerned about this practice as was the Greco-Roman society of its day. The churches from which the Gospels and Epistles arose seem not to have considered homosexuality, as we know it, to be an issue at all. No statement of it appears in the Gospels, Acts or Revelation. It appears in the Epistles only three times, (As discussed previously, Jude, vs. 6-13 has a decidedly *heterosexual* focus.) In all three of these references

the material is expressed in the traditional terms current in Greco-Roman and Hellenistic Jewish cultures. Thus the NT is not only virtually *disinterested* in the topic of homosexuality, it has *nothing at all new* to say about it.

It is also noteworthy that the three texts that address homosexuality are written to churches located in the Greco-Roman world where pederasty was the *norm* for homosexual acts. Whether we like it or not this *requires* us to operate on the presupposition that all three of these texts oppose one form or another of pederasty, to the degree that they address homosexuality at all.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10.

This text says the, "*sexually immoral... adulteresses... malakoi nor arsenokoitai...will not inherit God's kingdom,*" 1 Cor. 6:9.

From the immediate context of this statement, it is clear that Paul is attacking certain practices he had heard were occurring in the Corinthian church. He lists three: (1) a man is living with his mother in law, (5:1-5); (2) saints are suing saints in civil courts rather than in ecclesiastical courts, (6:1-8); (3) male saints are having sex with female cult prostitutes, (6:12-20). Whatever sexual sins are under consideration, they are *heterosexual* in nature. However, the *nature* of the specific sins is not *primarily* significant. Underlying Paul's concern is the spiritual purity of the fellowship. The specific sins become an issue because they stain the purity of the church. This concern indicates what is the function of the sin catalogs in the context. Notice how the three lists build upon each other: The italicized words are the new ones in each list.

1 Cor. 5:10
immoral
greedy
robbers
idolaters

1 Cor. 5:11
immoral
greedy
robbers
idolaters
revilers
drunkards

1 Cor. 6:9-10
immoral
greedy
robbers
idolaters
revilers
drunkards
adulterers
malakoi
arsenokoitai
thieves

The first observation we make is that as the list grows in length the size of the club increases. Paul is building toward a rhetorical climax in which he emphasizes that such deeds exclude one from participation in God's kingdom. This, we will simply note in passing, does not equate with eternal damnation. Being saved and going to Heaven does not equal participation in God's kingdom. The latter has to do with exercising the power, anointing and authority that enables one to be fully productive in God's kingdom. One may be saved and go to Heaven yet fail to experience the fullness of the earth-bound side of the reign of God. But that is a topic we cannot discuss in fullness here. It must suffice here to say that to "inherit the kingdom of God" has nothing essential to do with being saved or lost. It has to do with participating in the privileges and blessings of God's rule. Just as one might live in the USA, yet live as an outcast, homeless, poor, etc. so one may live in God's kingdom though never benefit from all that is possible therein. Paul's point then is that Christians can live in such fashion as to become disqualified for true "kingdom living."

The second observation is also clear: Paul is not concerned especially about any one item in his lists. There is no indication that he desired to emphasize either *malakoi* or *arsenokoitai* in his third list. If any of the sins were of special importance it would probably be the four that appear in all three lists. But this is not provable. And the conclusions might be appropriate that because *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* appear in only one list, that they are not considered as significant as the rest. This too is not provable, but it should be considered.

Paul is aware that he is writing to former pagans. It is likely that he is therefore listing sins that are especially associated with pagan life. Thus it is important to observe that he includes "idolaters" in all three lists and that *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* were especially known in that culture as expressions of idol worship.

Interestingly, Paul's lists take the same form as traditional lists already existing in Hellenistic Judaism. Paul's third list, which is his full compilation, is bracketed by the phrase "kingdom of God" in a way that is common in Hellenistic literature, suggesting that Paul is borrowing from Hellenistic Jewish tradition for *rhetorical* purposes.

The Special Case Of *Malakos* And *Arsenokoitai*

The word *malakoi* is discussed as follows, in The Complete Biblical Library, Greek-English Dictionary, (word # 3092).

“Soft. This is the word for “soft” or “soft to the touch.” The Greek, *malakos*, is used (1) of things, such as clothes, and (2) of persons, especially to denote catamites, those who allow themselves passively to be used homosexually.

...In 1 Cor. 6:9 *malakos* is used in the metaphoric sense. Here it refers to persons who are “soft.” The rendering “effeminate” (*malakos*) designates the passive partner of a homosexual relationship, and “abusers of themselves with mankind,” (*malakos* and *arsenokoites*, [727]) denotes both the passive and active homosexual partners.”

The Greek word *arsenokoites*, translated “homosexuals” is discussed as follows, in The Complete Biblical Library, Greek-English Dictionary, (word # 727).

“A male homosexual, sodomite... *Arsenokoites* denotes a male homosexual, a sodomite. It is a compound word, formed from *arsen*, “male,” and *koite*, “bed.” Thus an *arsenokoites* is a man who lies with another man.

Paul alone used the Term in the New Testament: once in 1 Cor. 6:9 and again in 1 Tim. 1:10. Homosexuals are excluded from the kingdom, just as idolaters, adulterers, thieves...Such sinful behavior is condemned by the Law and is against sound doctrine.

From Corinth, where homosexuality and other vices prevailed, Paul wrote the epistle to the Romans in which he further condemned this practice, (Rom. 1:27). Here he stated that this kind of sin is a punishment from God because one had forgotten God.

Like a number of other languages, Greek has different words to distinguish between the active and passive roles in a homosexual relationship. *Arsenokoites* expresses an active homosexuality; a related term, *malakos*, connotes an effeminate, passive homosexuality, in which a man allows others to exploit him sexually.”

Such comments typify the concept of the majority of commentators, that these two words *mean* homosexual conduct. But we will demonstrate that these words have no such meaning. First, let us add Paul's comments to Timothy.

Male *arsenokoites* are classified in 1 Tim. 1:10, with the "*lawless, rebellious, ungodly, sinners, unholy, profane, who kill their fathers or mothers, murderers, immoral men, kidnappers, liars, perjurers, and whatever is contrary to sound teaching.*"

Paul gives the words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* no special weight. And it does not appear that Paul is especially concerned about accusing these saints of such practices. If so, it seems likely that he would have included them also in his several other lists, which he does not. Whatever Paul's intention in using these words, we will show that *malakoi* refers to the effeminate call-boy object of pederasty. *Arsenokoitai* means nothing more than "a male in bed." The word itself carries no inherent homosexual meaning, in spite of authoritarian statements like those quoted above. Its only *demonstrable* meaning is that of "a male who goes to bed," or "a male who has intercourse." This would seem, because of the context, to point to *fornication* of some kind, but *not* specifically or especially to homosexuality in any form. The only way to discover what this word means is to learn how it was used in the Greco-Roman society in which it originated. Whatever it meant to them, it means in Paul's writings.

Since the word *arsenokoitai* has no pre-history in Greek literature then its meaning must be sought in post NT writings. From those writings we learn that this word referred to an adult who took the active, predatory role in pederastic encounters. Its use together with *malakos* indicates that *malakos* refers to the effeminate call-boy and *arsenokoitai* refers to the male who keeps the *malakos* as a "mistress" or who hires him occasionally for his sexual desires. A very specific form of pederasty is thus addressed and the prevailing literature of the Greco-Roman world agrees entirely with the Hellenistic Jewish literature and with NT writing in condemnation of pederasty. These two words therefore *cannot* be said to condemn generic homosexuality *simply because these words were never used in that society to even refer to generic homosexuality!* These words therefore do not exclude the *generic* practice of homosexuality from the kingdom of God simply because these two

words make *no reference* to that practice at all. We make the obvious comparison again: generic heterosexuality does not exclude one from God's kingdom. But *sinful forms* of heterosexuality do so; i.e. "fornication" and "adultery," (1 Cor. 6:9). In other words, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* may denote sinful homosexual acts, just as "fornication" and "adultery" denote sinful heterosexual acts. But in neither case is generic homosexuality or heterosexuality the issue.

It is clear enough that Biblical condemnation of certain *forms* of heterosexuality is not therefore condemnation of heterosexuality as such. Everyone accepts this as true. Why then do we believe that Biblical condemnation of a specific *form* of homosexuality is therefore condemnation of homosexuality as such? The facts are very clear: [1. No Scripture addresses same-sex relationships *as such*; [2. *Every reference* to homosexuality is directed toward some form of spiritual or social *misuse*, i.e. rape, pederasty or idolatrous prostitution; [3. No reference to female homosexuality exists in Scripture, (No, not even in Rom. 1). Exactly as with heterosexual sin, homosexual sin is specific in nature. Illegitimate homosexual expressions do not void homosexuality as such.

The Context Of These Words.

In view of the other types of individuals named together with the *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, it seems doubtful that Paul is excluding both the youth and adult male from participation in God's kingdom on the basis of moral purity. All the rest of them – temple prostitutes, idolaters, adulterers, thieves, greedy people, drunkards, abusive persons, swindlers, – engage in activities that destroy the property and persons of others. All of them are either victimizers who dominate or exploit others or victims who, for whatever reasons, allow others to victimize and exploit them. As long as such people continue in their injustice, oppression and enslavement, they are incapable of receiving the gifts that the rule of God imparts: liberty in Jesus Christ, individual possibility and potential for greatness and fullness of life. Thus Paul's point revolves around any behavior, sexual or otherwise, that victimizes and exploits other people. We cannot be excused if we rip the words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* from this context and treat them as isolated and special cases.

Because of the nature of what the NT actually says and the context in which it is said, the NT provides no ammunition with which to condemn modern homosexuality. Compared to the much more certain condemnation of anger, wrath, malice, adultery, rebellion, murder, theft, etc., the few verses that *might* be read as condemning homosexuality are *firstly meager*; and *secondly most ambiguous*. For this reason the interpretation of only two words, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, has commanded an inordinate amount of attention and unfortunately they have been forced to play a role in this discussion which they *cannot legitimately* play. In truth, these two words are the only real arsenal with which interpreters can appear to effectively attack modern homosexuality. But to do so they must put a meaning *upon* the words that the words do not have *inherently*, and they must *ignore* the historical/cultural/lexical meaning and application of these words. When one realizes this, one also realizes that if this is the best argument that can be made against generic homosexuality then the case against it is not viable at all. Trumped up evidence is worthless for discovering truth. In courts of law such “evidence” is thrown out as “inadmissible.” In some cases, criminal charges are filed against those who “tamper with the evidence.” It is too bad that such strictures are not placed upon those who tamper with Biblical evidence. *Most* of what we have been told about “The Biblical condemnation of homosexuality” is nothing more than trumped up evidence. An entire theological schematic has been fabricated from less than a handful of bits and pieces, *none* of which touch the issue of homosexuality as a consensual sexual orientation.

The History Of These Words

By analyzing ancient meanings of these words and comparing the historical changes in their translations, we discover that interpretations of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, as condemning modern homosexuality, have been driven more by a modern ideological interest in marginalizing and dispossessing gays and lesbians than by the well established disciplines of scholarly translation and exegesis. The history of the these words demonstrates a pitiful lack of integrity in defining their true, lexical, historical and culturally mandated meaning.

Before considering the specific history of the words *arsenokoites* and *malakos*, it might be helpful to make a few observations about the nature of words, and how they develop. Words do not simply arise in a vacuum. Words originate as a *product* of human efforts to communicate about specific events, actions, situations, objects, desires and so forth. Words are neither coined nor spoken for the sake of the *inherent* value of the word alone. Apart from what words *mean* in the minds of those who speak and hear them, words have no use at all. Nor do words have either an *inherent* or an *assigned* meaning. The meaning of words is *derived* from life situations. Words are merely *symbols* that *represent* actual objects, events, etc. For example, a farmer who wants to tell a neighbor about his new plow does not go to a dictionary to learn what to “call” this thing. He knows to call it a “plow” because those around him use that word to refer to that object. Words are listed in dictionaries long *after* they have become an established part of human communication. What is given in a dictionary as a word’s “definition” is the meaning people attach to that word. The lexicographer’s task is to research the beginnings of words to discover what their original meaning was, then to compare the original meaning to the current meaning. If a word no longer *means* in modern usage what it originally *meant*, the word’s original meaning is referred to as “archaic.” As societies develop, words change meaning, thus their definitions change accordingly. At any point in history a word will mean something *specific* to the people who used *that word* in *that historical setting*. Whatever changes a word may experience over time, it always signified something specifically definable in whatever generation it appeared.

The method for learning what a word meant in a given society at a given time period, is very straightforward. One researches the writings and other recordings of the language of the common people of that period, and observes how they used certain words. What did those words describe? What exactly did those people communicate by using those words? In Biblical study this research is absolutely essential for learning the meaning of the words of Scripture. Simply reading a modern translation does not guarantee that we are “seeing” what the original authors and audience of Scripture “saw.” Thus to find the true meaning of *arsenokoites* and *malakos*, for example, one must go to the extant written records of the period during which those words were used. Their meaning

will be discovered as one sees those words used in the every-day conversations, letters, books and other documents of that period. When one has learned the original meaning of any Biblical word, one is utterly without justification in ignoring that original meaning and substituting a meaning more suited to one's personal opinions or theological agenda. That this has occurred with both these Greek words is unquestionable. As we shall show, the original meaning of these words is well enough established that it becomes unconscionable for a translator to assign to either of them the meaning of "male homosexuality," "sodomy" and the like. Indeed, if these two words had actually been *translated* according to prevailing standards of scholarship, there would be no verse in the whole Bible that even appears to unambiguously refer to "homosexuality." This statement may appear radical, but we will demonstrate its basis.

The failure of sincere people to be completely, non-prejudicially objective and honest in their study of the relevant texts, and their failure to use the higher law of love, (cf. this topic developed below), as the working apparatus by which to understand and apply God's word concerning homosexuality, is made brutally evident by a church that has, without sufficient warrant, mistreated and castigated lesbian and gay people. It is our intention to demonstrate the truth of this statement by an objective look at the real *meaning* of the words used, the *context* in which they are used, and the *culture* that gave rise to their use. This is necessary because NT statements that seem to contain any reference to homosexuality are responses to that first century cultural scene. Until we know for sure what the Biblical authors were against we cannot even begin to reflect honestly upon the relevance of those writings for contemporary issues. Failure in this matter resulted in the modern church's effective spiritual dispossession of its women because, "the Bible says 'let women keep silence in the church'; and 'I suffer not a woman to teach.'" Disregard for the cultural setting of those two scriptures produced theology and practice, still much in vogue today, that robs all Christian women of their spiritual status in the church and silenced one of the most powerful voices available to the church and to the world. Disenfranchisement of women is one of the greatest sins of the church. We may find that disenfranchisement of all same-sex people will be our second greatest sin. Both have been excluded from participation in God's

kingdom on exactly the same fraudulent basis. We have no right to simply assume that Paul's statements about women reflect the same cultural scene in which we live. And we have no right to simply assume that "homosexuality" *then* was the same as what we call homosexuality *now*. So, let's look at the words.

Arsenokoites

The history of the translation of this word is interesting and revealing. From 1380 (Wyclif) to the present, this word has given translators fits. Wyclif translated it: "they that do lechery with men." Until the 20th century, similar translations were made: e.g. "abusers of themselves with mankind," "the liers with mankind." But in the mid-20th century a shift occurred in which translations began using phrases such as "sodomite," "sexual perverts," "homosexual offenders," "homosexual perverts," "male homosexuals," and "practicing homosexuals."

Thus between the end of the 19th and mid-20th centuries, translation of *arsenokoites* shifted from a reference to an action that any man might perform regardless of orientation, to refer to a "perversion;" either an *action* or a *tendency* thought to be self-evidently abnormal and diseased. Thus the shift in translation reflected the 19th century invention of the term "homosexual," coined to describe what was thought to be an "abnormal" sexual orientation. All earlier translations took the term correctly to refer to men, but the newer ones broadened the reference to include people of either sex who might be diagnosed as suffering from the modern, (supposed), "perversion" of homosexuality. This shift is without philological justification. Translators are responsible for giving us, as nearly as possible, the *exact meaning* of words, not their personal theological perspective nor the prevailing perspective of society on those words. In the case of both *arsenokoites* and *malakos*, the translations actually became "interpretations" that better qualify as *commentaries*, prompted by shifts in modern sexual ideology.

The attempt has been made to translate *arsenokoites* by taking each of its parts, *arsen*, (male), and *koite*, (bed), and deciding that since they are combined into one word, then "obviously the meaning is 'males who go to bed with males'." This approach to linguistics and translation is both foolhardy and invalid. It is a mere

pretense. It is a faulty and risky process to simply divide a longer word into its parts, discover the meaning of its individual parts, then decide that the meaning of the longer word is merely a combination of its component parts. To “understand” does not mean to “stand under.” In fact nothing in either of the components, “stand” and “under,” has *anything* to do with the meaning of “understand.” Attempting to derive the meaning of *arsenokoites* by the meaning of its components is naïve and indefensible. This is to define a word by its *assumed etymology*. The etymology of a word is its *history*, not its *meaning*. Simply defining this word according to the combination of its two parts would yield no other meaning than “a male who goes to bed.” Thus it could as easily *mean* a “man who takes a nap,” as anything else. Only by the context of the word, could we know that the word indicates a *sexual* going to bed. And certainly *nothing in the word itself suggests a homosexual act of any kind!*

As another example, no one would take the word “chairman” as having any necessary reference either to a “chair” or to a “man,” even if the word *originally* had some such reference. Words are dynamic; they change over time. No philologist tries to make ancient meanings of words fit modern usage, and vice versa. In our pursuit of Bible understanding, we are obligated to find what the words of Scripture meant both to the authors and to the original readers. We must, for example, learn what Paul *actually thought* when he wrote the words *arsenokoites* and *malakos*. And what did the ancient readers think when they read those words? The only reliable way to define a word is to analyze its use in as many different contexts as possible. What the word “means” will become clear as we see how people used the word in different situations.

One problem we face when trying to define the meaning of ancient words, is that there are no ancient tools available that compare with our modern dictionary. One cannot simply consult a first century “Greek dictionary” and find an authoritative listing of first century Greek words with their then-current definitions and cultural implications. Therefore we are required to research all other available first century documents such as legal records, historical writings, books, articles, personal letters, etc. to learn how the people of that day used the words we are trying to understand today. We have no other way to understand what Paul meant by the words *malakos* and *arsenokoites*. It is absurd and utterly devoid

of true scholarship, to simply place upon either of those words our current concept of homosexuality. An interesting fact to include here is that there was no word in either the Hebrew language of the OT, or the Greek of the NT, that is equivalent to our word “homosexual.” Because this is so, to use “homosexual” as the translation of either *malakos* or *arsenokoites* is a remarkably bad error. If we can find from ancient documents, how first century people used these words, then we can know how Paul used the words and how his readers understood them. We simply must not “define” them according to our modern theological predilections.

In the available documents from the first century we find surprisingly few uses of the word *arsenokoites* and most of those occur in a simple list of sins, mostly in quotations of Biblical lists, thus providing no *explanation* of the term, no independent usage and few clues from the context about the term’s meaning. But we can learn *something* by analyzing these different occurrences of *arsenokoites*, especially where it occurs in sin lists that do not merely quote 1 Cor. 6:9 or 1 Tim. 1:10. This analysis provides a basis for making some very confident conclusions.

Vice lists are sometimes organized into groups, with sins of similar nature put together with one another. For example, a list may group sexual sins, then those of violence, then others related to injustice. When we find *arsenokoites* in lists outside the NT, it appears in contexts where we *would not* expect to find a reference to homosexual acts, and it does *not* appear where we *would* expect such a reference. For example in lists that include sexual sins like adultery, prostitution, fornication, this word does not occur. But it *does* occur in lists that include injustice, exploitation, theft, etc. While this is not definitive, it is highly suggestive that to the Greco-Roman world of the NT, this word has a very specific meaning relating to injustice and exploitation, rather than to matters of sexual morality or to homosexual acts in general. It evidently referred to some means of economic exploitation, perhaps by means of physical force, evidently by means of sex, but not *necessarily* by homosexual sex.

One of the earliest occurrences of this word outside the NT, appears in the *Sibylline Oracle* 2.70–77. This oracle provides an independent use of the word, appearing in a section listing acts of

economic injustice and exploitation. The editors of the English translation quoted here, (J.J. Collins), label the section “On Justice.”

“Never accept in your hand a gift that derives from unjust deeds.

Do not steal seeds. Whoever takes for himself is accursed...

Do not arsenokoitein, do not betray information, do not murder.

Give one who has labored his wage. Do not oppress a poor man.

Take heed to your speech. Keep a secret matter in your heart. Make provision for orphans and widows and those in need. Do not be willing to act unjustly, and therefore do not give leave to one who is acting unjustly.”

If we take the context as indicating the meaning, we must conclude that *arsenokoitein* here refers to some form of economic exploitation, violence or injustice, probably by sexual means: e.g. rape, sex by economic coercion, exploiting children, etc.

This suggestion is supported by the fact that a list of specifically sexual sins occurs in this same oracle but in a different place where we would expect to find a reference to male/male sex if such was considered to be sexual sin. In 2.279–82 the author condemns “defiling the flesh by licentiousness,” “undoing the girdle of virginity by secret intercourse,” abortion and exposure of infants, (both used as means of birth control by people who used sex out of lust rather than from true love and for procreation). If the prohibition against *arsenokoitein* was understood by those people to be against homosexual sex in general, one would expect the term to occur in this list rather than among the terms in the previous list condemning unjust exploitation.

A similar case exists in the 2nd century, wherein “John” condemns the men of Ephesus in these words:

“You who delight in gold and ivory and jewels, do you see your loved (possessions) when night comes on? And you who give way to soft clothing, and then depart from life, will these things be useful in the place where you are going? And let

the murderer know that the punishment he has earned awaits him in double measure after he leaves this world. So also the poisoner, sorcerer, robber, swindler, the arsenokoites, the thief and all of this band...So men of Ephesus, change your ways; for you know this also, that kings, rulers, tyrants, boasters, and warmongers shall go naked from this world and come to eternal misery and torment," (section 36; Hennecke-Schneemelcher).

It is apparent from this quote that *arsenokoites* is in a class of offenses characterized by abuse of others via misuse of power, money and unjust exploitation. The issue throughout is on injustice and exploitation of others, not sex. The appropriate translation of this word in such texts would be something akin to "sexual violence."

As in the case of the *Syballine Oracle*, "John" does denounce sexual sins elsewhere in the text and the word *arsenokoites* is absent, (section 35). If this author took *arsenokoites* to refer to the "sin" of homosexual sex, we would expect him to mention it among other sexual sins rather than in the section condemning the rich and powerful for economic exploitation. Here again, *arsenokoites* probably refers to some kind of economic exploitation, probably by sexual means. Here is the telling point: though the word does possess sexual content, it is *not* grouped with words dealing with specifically sexual sin. Rather, it is grouped with words that condemn violence to and exploitation of other people. This means that the "sin" described by this word was not in its sexual expression, whether heterosexual or homosexual, but in the use of sex to harm others. Rape is rape, whether homosexual or heterosexual in expression. Violence is violence regardless of the sexual orientation.

Theophilus of Antioch, in his treatise addressed *To Autolychus*, gives another vice list. First he lists *two sexual sins*, adultery and fornication, then *three economic sinners*: thief, plunderer and defrauder. Sixth is *arsenokoites*, followed by savagery, abusive behavior, wrath, jealousy, boastfulness, conceit, "strikers," (those who physically hit people), greed, disobedience to parents and selling one's children. Here, *arsenokoites* is separated from the sexual sins by three terms that refer to economic injustice. If this

word meant homosexual intercourse why is it not categorized with the first two sexual sins? Furthermore, Theophilus takes these terms from the apostle Paul's vice lists. It is notable that Theophilus positions *arsenokoites* in his list to relate to sins of injustice and violence rather than sexual sins. This illustrates the thinking of first century people that *arsenokoites* does not refer to sexual *orientation* but to *abuse* of sex in a way that exploits others. In a later list in the same work, *arsenokoites* occurs in the same manner. Adultery and fornication come first, then *arsenokoites* then greed and idolatry. Its position in the middle of the two categories is appropriate since it is not primarily a sexual sin but rather a sin of exploitation and injustice by use of sex. Such consistent categorization by different writers demonstrates the prevailing perception of this word. Such is the common occurrence of this word in ancient documents. To simply ignore such evidence, and translate these words in a manner other than according to their common usage in the first century, is unforgivable pretension to scholarship.

We do not claim to know exactly what *arsenokoites* meant. Rather we are claiming that *no one* knows *exactly* what it meant, and that it was *never* used to describe a consensual homosexual act. Given the scarcity of evidence and the nature of the actual contexts outside Scripture, in which *arsenokoites* appears to refer to some form of violent, unjust exploitation, no one should be allowed to get away with claiming that, "of course" the term refers to "men who have sex with other men." The available evidence completely disallows this claim. This is a case of *personal ideology* transcending *philology*. Translating *arsenokoites* with our modern word homosexual is a peculiarly treacherous act of violence against true Biblical translation. Those who make such remarkably bad errors disqualify themselves from being considered as true scholars.

Malakos

The translations and interpretations of *malakos* provide an even clearer case of ideological scholarship. Many unambiguous examples of *malakos* exist, enabling us to be confident about its meaning. And the changes in translations of *malakos* provide a clear record of how interpretive decisions changed along with historical shifts in the ideology of sexuality; changes that reflected the mood of the day more than the precise meaning of words. Demonstrating

also that quite often, translation flows out of, and seeks to support, prevailing theology.

Early English translations render *malakos* by terms that denote a general weakness of character or degeneracy, usually “weaklings,” (Tyndale 1534, Coverdale 1535, Cranmer 1539). From 1582 to 1901, (Rheims, KJV, ASV), the preferred translation was “effeminate.” But as with *arsenokoites*, a curious shift takes place in mid-twentieth century. *Malakos* is no longer translated “effeminate” and instead, terms denoting specific sexual acts or orientation are substituted. NAB (1970) joins *arsenokoites* and *malakos* together as “sodomite,” NIV (1973) and NRSV (1989) translate *malakos* as “male prostitute” and others combine both words and offer the modernized categories of sexual or particularly homosexual “perversion,” (RSV 1946, TEV 1966, NEB 1970, REB 1992). As with *arsenokoites*, no real historical or philological evidence has ever been offered to support these shifts in translation, especially not that shift from “weaklings” in earlier versions, to “homosexual perversion” in current versions. In fact, all historical and philological evidence is on the side of the earlier versions. The shift in translation resulted not from the findings of historical scholarship but from shifts in sexual ideology. These later translators *did not* objectively define and translate this word. They *subjectively interpreted* it. They *substituted* subjective personal interpretation or *commentary*, in the place of true translation. Such action is inexcusable. The plain fact is that neither *arsenokoites* nor *malakos* means “homosexual,” “male prostitute,” or “perversion.” These meanings have been *placed upon* these words, not *derived from* them. These are examples, not of *translation*, but of *commentary*.

These statements are easy to support because *malakos* is very easy to *define exactly*. Abundant examples from ancient documents prove that *malakos* can refer to many things: the softness of expensive clothes, the richness and delicacy of gourmet food, the gentleness of light winds and breezes. When used as a term of moral condemnation, *malakos* still refers to something perceived as “soft”: e.g. laziness, degeneracy, decadence, cowardice, or summarized in one ancient category, the *feminine*. Men thought of women as weak, fearful, vulnerable, tender. They stay indoors and protect their *malakos* (soft) skin; their flesh is moister, more flaccid and more porous than male flesh, which is why their bodies must expel all that excess fluid monthly(!?). Prevailing thought was that

women are quintessentially penetrable; indeed women were *made* to be penetrated. It is their *purpose*. Their *malakos* nature is perfectly suited to this subservient, made to be dominated, role.

Thus a man who allowed himself to be penetrated – by either a man or woman – *could* be labeled a *malakos* for he has left his “natural” position of dominator, to become dominated. But to say that *malakos* meant a man who was penetrated is simply wrong. In fact a perfectly good word existed that possessed that narrower meaning: *kinaedos*. *Malakos* referred to the whole complex of femininity.

A man could leave himself open to charges of *malakos* by allowing himself to be penetrated. But those charges would be leveled against the “feminizing” of the man rather than to the sex act itself. The category of effeminate men was much broader than that. Often *malakoi* are those who cannot stand up to hard work. Xenophon uses this word for lazy men, (*Hellenica* 3.4.19; 6.1.6; *Apology* 19; *Memorabilia* 1.2.2). For Epictetus and the Cynic Epistles, the term refers to men who take life easy rather than enduring the difficulty of philosophy, choosing to eat and sleep too much, (Epictetus 3.6.9; 4.1.25; “Epistle of Crates” 19, “Epistle of Diogenes” 29). In Dio Cassius, (58.4.6), Plutarch (*Pericles* 27.4), and Josephus, (*War* 6.211; *Antiquities* 19.197), cowards are *malakoi*. Throughout ancient history *malakoi* are men who live lives of decadence and luxury, (Xenophon, *Hiero* 1.23; Plutarch, *Moralia* 831B; 136B; *Pericles* 27.4; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 12.536C; 543B). They drink too much wine, have too much sex (heterosexual sex at that!), love gourmet food and hire professional cooks. Josephus says a man is *malakia* if he is weak in battle, enjoys luxury or is reluctant to commit suicide, (*War* 7.338; *Antiquities* 5.246; 10.194). Dio Chrysostom says the common crowd might stupidly call a man *malakos* just because he studies a lot, (66.25) – that is, a bookworm might be called a “sissy.”

We see then that *malakos* describes a man who is “soft” in a wide variety of ways. It is not a sexual word at all. It *occasionally* applied to penetrated men, but *primarily* had no sexual connotation at all.

Malakos was more likely to be used in a sexual sense for a man who prettied himself up to further his *heterosexual* exploits. Greco-Roman culture assumed that both men and women would be attracted to pretty boys. Boys who worked to make themselves more attractive, whether they were trying to attract either men or

women, were called *malakos*. An old hag in a play by Aristophanes drags off a young man saying, "Come with me my little *softie* (*malakion*)" even though her intentions were strictly *heterosexual*, (*Ecclesiazusae* 1058). Plautus uses the Latin transliteration, *malacus*, to indicate effeminate men. In one play he uses it to refer to a penetrated man, but in another it refers to a man who seduces other men's wives, (*Miles Gloriosus* 3.1[1.668]; *Truculentus* 2.7.49 [1.610]). Thus we learn that in the ancient world effeminacy was implicated in heterosexual sex as much as, and even more so, than homosexual sex. Chariton, in his novel *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, provides a typical portrait of an effeminate man, (1.4.9); he has a fresh hairdo, scented with perfume; wears eye makeup, a soft (*malakon*) mantle, and light, swishy slippers; his fingers glisten with rings. It is a surprise to our modern audience that this *malakos* man is off to seduce, not a man but a maiden! Then in the Pseudo-Aristotleian *Physiognomy*, the author portrays the "charitable type" of man by making him typically effeminate yet completely *heterosexual*. Such men he says are delicate, pale, with shining eyes and wrinkled noses; they cry a lot, are "reminiscent," warmhearted and with nice positions. They are particularly fond of women, with whom they have lots of sex and they tend to produce female children, (808a34).

So a man could be branded as *malakos* whether he had sex with men *or* women. It was not the sexual orientation that mattered but rather the complex system of behavior that marked the man as "soft" in a variety of ways. One might be a *malakoi* who *never* had sex with another man. Thus *it would never have occurred* to an ancient person – not to Paul and not to any of his readers – to think that *malakos* or any other word indicating femininity *in itself* referred to homosexual sex at all. It was used more often in reference to heterosexual sex. The word *malakos* refers to the entire ancient complex of the devaluation of the feminine. People could use *malakos* as an insult directed against men who loved women too much, who were dominated by them, or who exhibited "womanly" traits of laziness, softness, emotionalism, fear, etc.

There is no historical, cultural or philological reason to take *malakos* as a specific or even *likely* reference to a homosexually penetrated man. It is even less defensible to narrow that reference down to mean "male prostitute." The meaning of the word is very clear. *Malakos* means "effeminate." For most English speaking twenty-first century Christians, effeminacy may be distasteful but

not sinful. Translators seem to have *deliberately* chosen to *not* actually *translate* this word, but to *comment* on it, perhaps to avoid embarrassing the modern church with difficulties we would not know how to deal with. How would we consider for example, the prissy male church musician with girlish body language and soft voice, or the stereotyped male interior designer or hairdresser? We would not, on the basis of a limp wrist, consider such men as fuel for hell. Our Bibles could not be allowed to condemn something that to us is merely an embarrassment. So the obvious and well attested translation of *malakos* as “effeminate” was abandoned and in its place was substituted a word for a practice that is more “worthy” of condemnation by “holy” people. Again we observe, *translation* gave way to *commentary*.

What do we tell our church people “effeminate” means? As the ancient world *understood* it and therefore *as Paul used it*, “effeminate” included eating or drinking too much, enjoying gourmet food, wearing nice underwear or shoes, wearing much of anything on his head, having long hair, shaving, caring for his skin, wearing cologne or after shave, dancing too much, laughing too much, gesticulating too much. Keeping one’s knees together is “effeminate” as is swaying when walking, or bowing the head. There were also the sexual positions: being penetrated (by a man or a woman using a dildo), enjoying sex with women too much, being sexually dominated by a woman. Such a long and varied list contributed to the usefulness of the word as a weapon. It was an easily adaptable condemnation. Ancients used *malakos* as an insult in exactly the same way a weak man might be called a “pussy” in our own day!

Many of the previously itemized things do not make a man effeminate today. If in trying to be Biblical, we try to take seriously Paul’s condemnation of *malakos*, do we condemn what Paul and his readers would have condemned? Or do we condemn only those things our culture considers effeminate? And what might those things be: Taking piano lessons? Ballet dancing? Singing falsetto in the men or boys choir? Shaving one’s body hair, (e.g. for a swim meet or bicycle race)? Being a “drag queen?” Having a transsexual operation? Wearing *any* article of women’s clothes? Or do we just ignore this problem and just narrow the category to include only those people most heterosexual Christians have no problem condemning: homosexual men in general?

The ancient condemnation of the penetrated man was possible only because sexist ideology had already inscribed the inherent inferiority of women upon the psyche of heterosexuals. To be penetrated was to be inferior because women were inferior. And to be penetrated was the woman's "natural" role. Let us be clear that our modern culture has in no way liberated itself from this sexism. People who retain Paul's condemnation of effeminacy as ethical grounding for a condemnation of contemporary homosexuality, must face the fact that they thereby participate, albeit, we trust, ignorantly and unwillingly, in the hatred and contempt of women inherent in the ancient use of the term. To mask our very real problems in being true to Paul's condemnation of effeminacy by telling our people that the word "really" just refers to boy prostitutes or "passive homosexuals" is either willful ignorance or outright dishonesty.

Some scholars and Christians have desired to make *arsenokoites* and *malakos* mean both *more* and *less* than the words actually mean, depending on the heterosexist goals of the moment. Rather than honestly admitting that *arsenokoites* most probably refers to a specific role of exploitation, they say it refers to "active homosexuals" or "sodomites" or some other catch-all term, usually broadening its reference to include all homosexual eroticism. Rather than admitting the obvious, that *malakos* was a blanket condemnation of all *effeminacy* in men, they explain that it refers specifically to the homosexually penetrated man. Modern scholars, without any historical, cultural or philological evidence, have narrowed down the wide range of meanings of *malakos* so that it now condemns one group: gay men – in particular, "bottoms." In order to condemn modern homosexual relationships they insist that the two words mean nothing more and nothing less than what *they say* they mean. It should be clear to our readers that this exercise is driven not by passionate commitment to ethical research and strict integrity with all available evidence, but by heterosexist ideology.

Paul's moral disapproval of "homosexual" acts arises specifically from male perception of the female role on the part of what is frequently designated as the "passive" partner. The submissive one threatens manhood by abandoning the position of masculine dominance. Male dominance is the basic issue in the Sodom story, (Gen. 19), and that of the Levite at Gibeah, (Jdg. 19).

In both cases the men of the city were bent on violently exerting power over their victims. In those societies, such power was associated with masculinity as such. Men are powerful, women are weak. Men dominate, women submit. Therefore enforce your dominance over other strangers by forcibly penetrating them. This is the theme of both Gen. 19 and Jdg. 19.

Thus in Paul's writings, the homosexual references should be treated as we treat the "long hair" and "women be silent" texts: i.e. applicable for Paul's specific purpose for that specific culture, but never intended to be a rule for all people for all time. Understanding cultural setting is so crucial! Men and women of integrity will not establish a moral "oughtness" by use of specific Biblical commandments without carefully considering the historical context, both ancient and contemporary, in which such commandments arose and are to be applied.

In Paul's day, the moral writings of the Bible and secular culture had no understanding of same-sex orientation comparable to what we today call "homosexuality." In that era moral philosophers believed same-sex practice inevitably involved idol worship, or violence, injustice or exploitation of others, especially of a young person by an older person. Therefore *it is not synonymous* with consensual same-sex practice among peers. The one is exploitation and injustice, the other is not. The one harms another person, the other does not. We feel that the evidence, by its nature, makes it improper to use Paul's name in support of a prohibition against modern same-sex practice. What Paul was addressing is not the same as prevails in our modern world. For Paul, homosexual practice was linked to Gentile pagan worship and exploitation of another person. And the "unnatural" premise collapses under the weight of 1 Cor.11:14-15, where Paul finds long hair "unnatural" for men. Truthfully, the only "natural" thing is to let one's hair grow without cutting it at all.

Paul's fundamental concern about same-sex practice is just as valid today as then. No practice, sexual or otherwise, is acceptable when offered to pagan "gods" or when it exploits other people. Heterosexuality as such cannot be condemned on the basis that some heterosexuals stalk and abuse children, or commit heterosexual rape, or use sex as a form of economic injustice or extortion or manipulation. In the same spirit, homosexuality as such cannot be condemned on the basis that some homosexuals

stalk and abuse young boys, or commit homosexual rape, or use sex as a form of economic injustice or extortion or manipulation. In either case, it is not the nature of the sexual orientation that is to be condemned, but the act of exploitation that hurts others. It seems apparent that in the relevant Biblical material, condemnation of same-sex activity derives not from the nature of same-sex orientation but from certain same-sex practices in Biblically current culture that violated honor of God and love for man. With homosexuality as with heterosexuality, God condemned any sexual expression such as:

Cultic prostitution, homosexual or heterosexual, wherein God is dishonored through worship to a false god.

Prostitution, homosexual or heterosexual, that violated an established marriage relationship. This was “adultery.”

Sex in *any context* that threatened established marriage relationships. This was “adultery.”

Rape, homosexual or heterosexual, as an act of violence against another person.

Incest, because it violated close relationship, especially the vulnerability of children to adult family members.

Sexual manipulation, as in getting a person drunk so as to “look upon their nakedness.”

Manipulation by adults of vulnerable youth, for pederastic forms of homosexuality.

It seems very clear that Scripture does not condemn same-sex activity between consenting adults any more than it condemns heterosexual activity between consenting adults. Scripture condemns sexual sins *regardless* of orientation.

A few other obvious facts in the Biblical references to this subject are significant:

(1) Every *clear* reference to homosexuality is always put in the *male* gender. This is true whether we look at the *gender of the words*, or at the *description of the acts*.

(2) The single reference in Rom. 1:26 that *seems* to include women in the practice of homosexuality, very likely *does not* do so. At any rate, the nature of this verse is such that we *cannot* make final judgment against female homosexuality.

(3) The description in Rom. 1:26, of the sin involving women, is in their “exchange” of one thing that is “natural” for

another thing that is “against nature.” Full consideration must be given to the meaning of “exchange” and to discovery of what exactly they did that was “against nature.” Since nothing is said in Scripture that allows us to make a definitive decision about either of those questions, and since otherwise the Bible uses “natural and unnatural” in a way that restricts their use to *cultural* issues rather than *moral* issues, we cannot conclude that a “lesbian” orientation is “unnatural.” That conclusion is purely subjective and is placed *upon* the text because of predisposition.

More On Women And Homosexuality.

Rom. 1:26 is *especially* significant for the fact that it is the *only one* in the *entire Bible* that *seems* to include *female* homosexuality as a prohibition. All other Scriptures deal *specifically* with male homosexuality. It is worth examining in more detail. What exactly does Rom. 1:26 say about women?

As shown above, the word “exchange” means “to exchange, alter, substitute.” Thus these women “exchanged natural sexual relationships for that which is not according to nature...” Their behavior was true sexual *perversion*. It was “degrading,” that is, “shameful, dishonorable, disgraceful, outrageous.”

Their sexual aberration was *inherently* “unnatural.” What was “unnatural” was not the fact that women were interacting with women. The text *does not say* that women were doing this “unnatural” act *with other women*. But women were doing *something* that was *inherently* “unnatural.” It was the *nature of the act itself* that was “unnatural.”

One of the first observations about Rom. 1:26 is that the sin of these women is couched in very *imprecise* terms. We have this: “*their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural.*” Compare that vague statement with this: “*in the same way the men...burned in their desire towards one another, men with men committing indecent acts...*” The importance of this is in the fact that it is said *explicitly* that the men were burning with lust for other men, and men doing “*indecent*” sexual acts *with other men*. However *nothing* of the kind is said of women. We might *think* that Paul *meant* that “women were doing unnatural sex acts *with women*,” but he *does not say that*. It may or may not be a reference to what we call

“lesbianism.” The exact meaning does not lie on the surface as it does relative to the men’s sin. Since this is the only place in the entire Bible that makes such a reference, and since there is no explanation of exactly what it refers to, we *cannot possibly* define their sin. To do so is to *add* to Scripture our personal opinion, and is indefensibly dishonest.

Both the women and the men were doing something which, *in its very nature*, was “degrading.” The *act itself* was “shameful,” “disgraceful,” “indecent.” It is not that an otherwise innocent act was made disgraceful by the fact that women did it with women. It is that *the act itself, regardless of who does it, was inherently disgraceful*. We might think of possibilities:

Is the act of kissing *inherently* disgraceful? No. Even if women kiss women, and men kiss men, the *act itself* remains inherently innocent.

Is the act of kissing and fondling breasts, *inherently* disgraceful? No. The act itself does not change *inherently* if it is done by women to each other.

Is fondling sexual organs *inherently* disgraceful? No. If one woman fondles another woman’s sex organs, or a man fondles a man’s sex organs, the *act itself* is not *inherently* changed.

Observe again that Paul does not say women were doing whatever they were doing, *with other women*. The women may have been doing degrading things *to themselves*, or may have been allowing men to do degrading things to them. Since Paul does not specify that women were doing these things with women, we *cannot* make it definitive that such was the case.

Thus our problem is determining what was the “degrading” thing these women were doing. No one can *legitimately* say *absolutely*, even though many automatically say women were sexually relating to each other, and that this was the “degrading” thing. But this does not fit the language. For sexual activity is not *inherently* degrading. Something about *the act itself* made it degrading, both for men and women.

Some things that might fit this category, based on our studies of the words used, and the cultural setting of these texts, would be:

(1) Women allowing themselves to be used by “effeminate” men, or *malakoi*. In this case, the “degrading” nature of the would be a *cultural* issue, inasmuch as effeminate men were “unnatural” in that culture. In another culture where such

effeminacy is not considered unnatural, then women relating sexually to such men would not be degrading.

(2) Women, like the men, engaging in any sexual activity that connected with idolatry. In any culture, Scripture makes sexual activity related to idol worship, abominable. That is, the abomination is not related to the sex act itself, but rather to its use in worship to idols.

(3) Women, like the men, engaging in sex with children, which was exploitative and unjust. Scripture defines this as abominable and degrading because it works evil toward innocent and vulnerable victims.

The Bible puts all those three acts in the category of “unnatural... degrading... abominable... defiling.” Since the first is related strictly to cultural issues, we are left with only two viable options. Sexual acts as described in (2) and (3) would be “unnatural... degrading... abominable... defiling,” regardless of who *does* the act or *with whom*. The women in this Scripture may not have had sexual contact with other women at all. The language does not demand or even *allow* that interpretation. Since the *actual words* of Paul do not allow us to conclude that he was addressing lesbianism, it is *dishonest* for us to *make* this his reference.

Paul says these women “exchanged” the natural function for the unnatural. It is more than likely that their sin was in “abandoning” sexual activity that demonstrated true concern, care and thoughtfulness for their partner, to pursue sexual activity that was manipulative, coercive, exploitative, perhaps including sexual worship of idols. All these acts are *inherently* “degrading.” Female/female sex and male/male sex appears to be *permissible* as long as such sexual orientation does not “use” and “abuse” the personal dignity and rights of another person, or has no connection with idolatry.

Why, exactly, do we think same-sex relationships are aberrations or “perverted?” Is there something *inherently* indecent, unnatural or unclean about two women, or two men embracing? Nothing they can *normally* do sexually is in that category. Oral sex, kissing, fondling with the hands, etc. all are *natural* parts of sexual play with both men and women. *The acts themselves are inherently innocent.* Only God’s law can make a thing “unnatural.” Consensual homosexuality in either men or women is not, according to the Bible, “unnatural” and forbidden simply because it

involves two people of the same sex. The Biblical censure of male homosexuality derives from its connection with violence, injustice, idol worship and with exploitation of minors. Such is doubtless the case also *if* Rom. 1:26 is actually making any reference to female homosexuality.

These things said, we make the following observations and conclusions.

(1) Male homosexuality is forbidden, under any circumstance that connects with idolatry, adultery, injustice or exploitation of a minor.

(2) No Scripture *clearly* addresses female homosexuality. Rom. 1:26 *may* do so, but such is not provable. If it does refer to female homosexuality, it doubtless does so in the same sense as it addresses male homosexuality: i.e. not the orientation as such, but the specifically harmful ways it is expressed. We must not attempt to establish Divine law on the basis of human guesswork.

(3) *If* Rom. 1:26 refers to woman/woman sexual contact, it does so only in the context of them doing some sort of “unnatural” act together. The *nature* of that act is not specified in Scripture. Our best guess is that women were using sex, as did men, in connection with idolatry, adultery, economic injustice or exploitation of minors.

1 Tim. 1:9-10.

Since there is nothing unique in this text that has not already been covered relative to Rom. 1 and 1 Cor. 6, we will not discuss it in detail. The individual words and the context are the same as we have already discussed and the conclusions are therefore the same.

Theological Considerations

We have examined the Scriptures that refer to “homosexual” behavior. Not one of them speaks unconditionally and unambiguously about homosexual practice. Each of them contains either *textual* problems or historic/cultural problems that make their application to modern “homosexuality” questionable. Thus we must examine the fundamental *theology* of Scripture to see if it gives us clarity about the validity of a homosexual lifestyle.

Homosexuality and Creation Theology

The most commonly accepted “theology of creation” appeals to the statement, “*male and female created He them,*” (Gen. 1:27,28), as proof that God set mankind upon a specifically heterosexual course. Yet the issue in this text is not sexual orientation but productivity. *Biology* is the point, not *sociology*. The story of man’s creation is set over against the creation of all other living creatures. Only man is made in God’s image and likeness. At the same time, man is not like God inasmuch as man is a sexual creature just as earth’s other creatures are. Man is to bring forth after his kind, just as plants and animals do. The bare fact that man is made “male and female” no more settles the “sexual orientation” issue than does the clothing with fig leaves and hiding in the garden settle the issue of how we deal with disobedience to God. The “male and female” nature of creation sets the stage for the command and possibility that all creatures, and especially humans will “*multiply and replenish the earth,*” (vs. 28). The fact that procreation figures prominently as the contextual explanation of the designation “male and female,” requires that we resist all assumptions based on this text, that God thereby sets the purpose of and limitations of the human sexual expression. That is, no human may legitimately cast these verses as “The Divinely inspired creation model for heterosexual sex only, and for procreation only.” The above references have been used to fashion a whole theology of “God’s creative purpose,” which sets in stone the following “Biblical parameters” of human sexuality:

- Heterosexual sex only, which includes “normal” intercourse in the missionary position only, thus excluding all “perversions” such as oral and anal sex, and masturbation.
- Sex for procreation only, thus demonizing sex pursued strictly for pleasure.
- Monogamy only, thereby casting as sinners and spiritual rebels, the most outstanding and holy people in history, (e.g. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Gideon, David).

Procreation is a wonderful thing, but it is not the sole purpose of sexuality. Procreation is not an essential part of our humanity. Couples who are childless because they either *choose* not to have, or who *cannot* have children are not therefore less human. Despite the

command that we “*be fruitful and multiply...*” we understand that not every human individual must personally keep that command.

The creation story recounts the creation of plants and animals after their kind. Yet nothing is said about “variations” and exceptions within both realms. Both plant and animal kingdoms display exceptions to the “male and female” pattern. True hermaphrodites exist in both realms. And the animal kingdom contains many examples of same-sex behavior. Thus we may legitimately claim that God’s “creative purpose” for non-human creation provides for self-fertilization and “virgin births,” true cross-gendered sexuality, and homosexuality. All this is illustrated in the plant and animal kingdom, and all of it functions strictly according to divinely implanted genetic codes and “instinct.” That is, homosexual behavior that is so well attested in monkey and ape tribes, for example, is not a matter of “conscious, sinful choice” but is a function of whatever instincts were put into animals by their Creator God.

In the same vein, the statement that humans were created “male and female,” does not inherently infer that monogamy is God’s unalterable will for human sexuality. Very soon after the fall we observe polygamy in the human family, (Gen. 4:23). From that point on polygamy is frequently referenced throughout Biblical history, yet never with a word of censure from the Creator. Thus definitions of “normal marriage” as monogamous, based on the creation account, are groundless. All we may *legitimately* conclude is that God made one man and one woman to whom He gave the command to begin the process that would result in populating the earth with humans. Going beyond this requires *speculation*. And speculation never establishes Biblical truth.

The purpose of the Genesis account of creation does not appear to be that of setting unalterable courses of specific species, but to inform readers of the general scope of creation and its generally observed occurrence in the earth. In this light, we may consider “male–female” to be the originally and generally intended expression of human sexuality. But just as the fall altered all other aspects of life, so may have the fall brought the seeds of same-sex desire. That it represents a *variation* from the *basic pattern* is no more proof that it is a “perversion,” than variation in the plant and animal kingdoms would prove to be perversions.

The identification of heterosexual marriage as “normalized” by the Genesis creation account, forming the backdrop against which the homosexual prohibitions are to be understood, reflects a *contemporary* understanding of the issue rather than an OT view. It is precisely our contemporary understanding of marriage that creates an unsolvable conflict for us in trying to establish monogamy as the only God-approved marriage covenant. The “monogamy only” position cannot be squared with the bald fact that scores of polygamists are referenced in Scripture, most of whom are God’s choicest servants, and not once is any of them censured in the slightest. Unbiased interpretation of Scripture is always at risk because of our human penchant for reading our personal viewpoints and convictions into the text. The Bible interpreter must be always on sober guard against casting the Biblical text in his personal light and reading it in the context of modern culture, rather than honestly allowing the text to simply speak what must have been true as relating to its *original* culture and purpose. Homosexual relationships are not viewed in Scripture as a threat to heterosexual marriage. The creation texts are neither models of nor prescriptions for heterosexual marriage. The creation texts serve no function in prohibiting sexual relationships outside the “prohibitive norm” of heterosexual, monogamous marriage. The first few chapters of Genesis no more prohibit homosexuality than they prohibit polygamy. And when we affirm that these texts form the *sole context* in which sexual desires find their *proper* fulfillment, we have injected our personal dogma into the text and stand guilty of perverting it. The creation account is not concerned with right or wrong sexual behavior at all, and the notion of “proper fulfillment of sexual desire” is totally foreign not only to these texts, but also to the whole OT understanding of marriage.

It is safe – and *sufficient* – to conclude that these texts simply announce the common pattern of heterosexual relations as the basis for human reproduction and fulfillment of the command to, “*be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth.*” As in the animal and vegetable kingdom, so in the human domain, (Gen. 1:22-28). The point is that God *created* life and life is *reproduced* by God’s brilliant design. It is also true that these texts *imply* that the sexual drive that unites man and woman is the basis for marriage and reproduction, (Gen. 2:24). But these texts do not *prescribe* any particular *form* of sexual behavior, or any form of social, sexual institution. The

creation account exists for a simple purpose – to explain why things are the way they are. This includes the explanation in Gen. 3 of *why* woman is subordinate to man, but neither stating nor demanding that she *should* be. Regulating sexual and marital relations is the province of law and custom, not narrative. We do well to understand that the laws and traditions that *did* regulate sex and marriage in Israel *never* referred to the creation accounts as models, *never* prescribed monogamy and *never* forbade homosexuality. For example, in the marriage blessing given to Ruth, the *polygamous* example of Rachel and Leah, both wives of Jacob, is invoked, not Eve, (Ruth 4:11).

We freely concur with the opinion that the creation accounts speak of the dominant pattern of sexual and marital relationships. But we do not agree with those who state, without evidence stronger than personal opinion, that these accounts allow for no variations from the dominant pattern. The prima facie evidence of God's acceptance of polygamy is sufficient to prove this point. It is one thing to state that "thus and so" is the *dominant* pattern. It is quite another to state that "thus and so" is the *exclusive* pattern. The theological problems posed by variations in nature, together with related ethical questions of appropriate social responses, is not adequately treated or even recognized in the Biblical text.

Much as most modern religious ears dislike hearing this, the fact is that we cannot get a ready-made sexual morality from the Bible. At most we can glean a basic foundation for it. If we hope to make sense of sex and use/enjoy it as God intended, then we must accept *personal responsibility* for examining our sexual desires in light of the words of Jesus that "all the law and the prophets" are comprehended in two commandments, "love God and love your neighbor," (cf. Matt. 7:12; 22:39f; Jn. 13:34; Rom. 13:8, 10; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8). Sexual ethics for Christians fall into the same category as all other ethics: we are self-governed by the law of love. Scripture does not serve us as an easy-answer-book for determining the propriety of all possible activities. It rather lays upon us the burden of behaving in all things so as not to breach love for God or love for other people. Sexual activity that honors the law of love is acceptable. This means that polygamy and concubinage are acceptable, (as is obvious from dozens of Scriptures), and it means that forms of homosexuality that do not harm other people are also acceptable. We are limited, *not* by a *supposedly inherent immorality* of

these sexual relations, but by *cultural* and *relational* considerations. We cannot disobey civil law by public practice of polygamy; we have no right to “rub in their face” a personal choice for homosexual relations; we cannot engage in *any* sexual relationship – whether *homo* or *hetero* – that harms other people. But we do have the right before God to practice what He does not prohibit in ways that do not violate individual rights, civil law and public law.

Homosexuality and Covenant

Covenant theology offers no basis for a blanket prohibition on homosexuality. The OT covenant is not the NT covenant. Christianity explicitly abandoned the OT cultic purity laws under which cultic forms of homosexuality had been banned, effectively abandoning that specific form of the prohibition, along with all other cultic regulations. Though the metaphor of God’s “marriage” to Israel continues into the NT in the relationship between Christ and the church, it is nonsense to use this *heterosexual* metaphor to condemn *same-sex* intimacy, since the metaphor originally asserted intimacy between a *masculine God* and *male Israelites*. The fact that the sign of the Mosaic covenant was penile circumcision makes this abundantly clear. And who can escape the possibly symbolic pointer to divinely approved polygamy, in the fact that Jesus Christ is the “Husband” not of a single spiritual “Bride,” but of *every* saved individual whether male or female!

Homosexuality and Righteousness

If the suffering that befell the people of Sodom and Gomorrah should be interpreted as God’s judgment against attempted homosexual gang rape, and homosexuality is therefore banned, then consistency demands that God’s justification of Lot, the Levite, and the old man of Gibeah who offered their daughter’s or concubine to be gang-raped and killed, should be interpreted as divine approval for men to assure their own well-being by delivering women to abuse and death. There are sinners, or “unrighteous” ones in the homosexual camp, just as there are *many more* “unrighteous” ones in the heterosexual camp. Automatic damnation of one group while applying grace to the other group, is Biblically indefensible. Excluding an entire community on such

flimsy basis is extremely dangerous and utterly unloving. Those who do so are guilty of the very thing that causes certain sex acts to be prohibited as sinful: such exclusion works injustice and hardship upon the oppressed ones. Thus in the name of “honoring God’s law” such people actually violate the very heart of God’s law. Those who do so will be fully reckoned with by the truly Righteous God.

Not The Specific Act, But Its Effect Upon Others

The pertinent Biblical texts place the *sinful expression* of same-sex relations in the same context as it places heterosexual sin: i.e. the context of cultic prostitution as pagan/idolatrous worship, incest, rape, adultery, and sexual exploitation of the weak and vulnerable. To see the importance of this, consider the fact that Scripture places many more emphatic prohibitions on certain forms of heterosexual relations than upon homosexual relations. We do not conclude therefore that all heterosexual expression is wrong. We avoid the specific behaviors condemned and enjoy the rest with no guilt. Simply because the Bible condemns heterosexual incest, rape, adultery, cultic prostitution and sexual exploitation of the weak, we do not condemn heterosexuality as inherently sinful. In the same way we must not condemn *homosexuality as such*, unless unbiased, truly objective, intensive research determines that the Bible truly condemns *homosexuality as such*, rather than certain specific expressions of it.

It seems clear to us that the Scriptures that condemn homosexual acts all appear in contexts relating either to exploitative behavior of other humans, or to dishonor of God by worshipping idols. Gen. 19 deals with attempted homosexual rape. Lev. 18, 20 deal with cultic issues of idolatrous prostitution. Rom.1, 1 Cor. 6, and 1 Tim. 1 deal with well known Greco-Roman cultural expressions of homosexual prostitution and pederasty. We can affirm, with Moses and Paul, their condemnation of exploitative forms of homosexuality that result from human sinfulness in refusing to acknowledge God as God, and of all humans as having sole rights to their own persons, specifically to their sexuality. But we *cannot*, and *must not* condemn gay and lesbian humans in *our age with our understanding*, on the basis of what Moses and Paul wrote about practices in *their day with their understanding*, if we

discover their understanding differs substantially from ours. We often fail to see that what the Bible is talking about, as the author and initial readers understood it, is not always what we are talking about. In our eagerness to find Biblical fuel for burning homosexuals we have missed the fact that what the Bible says about homosexuality is very different from what we are saying. So much so that it appears that the Bible offers virtually *nothing* that directly addresses homosexuality *as it is expressed in our culture*. A fruitful analogy for working this out in our minds, is the apparent dichotomy that exists between the Bible's condemnation of "adultery" side by side with the Bible's approval of the prevailing cultural practice of polygamy and concubinage. We moderns equate *polygamy* with *adultery*, yet the Bible does not. There is more there than meets the eye. We must be open to the possibility that we are also not seeing all there is to see on the issue of homosexuality. When we extract from *homosexuality as such*, the exploitative acts of pederasty, cultic prostitution and rape, do we still have Biblical condemnation of all other homosexual expressions? The answer, it seems to us, is NO!

A little thought will demonstrate how foolish and how dangerous it is to view this issue through our culturally focused eyes. Because of influences pressed upon us by preceding generations of Bible teachers who failed to do their homework, we have developed a superficial, pseudo-spiritual abhorrence about homosexuality. We automatically recoil at the very thought of it. We take this reaction to be "normal" and universal: i.e. "to any righteous person, there is something inherently repugnant, sickening, filthy about same-sex contact." Yet we are not nearly so dogmatic about many other issues like this.

To observe one's child playing gleefully with feces scooped out of its own diaper, is repugnant, but no parent recoils in horror, thinking the child is degenerate.

To Westerners, eating grub worms or grasshoppers is revolting and sickening. Yet many modern cultures eat them, as John the Baptist ate locusts along with his honey. Our cultural opinion is not normative and other cultures think us foolish to by-pass such "delicacies."

Westerners love their beef, but to natives of India butchering and eating a cow is a horrible atrocity; sickening in the absolute sense; truly "sin" against their gods. Yet we actually ridicule

their sensitivity on this issue. We do not hold their cultural sensitivity to be the norm.

Within our own Western culture, different “sub-cultures” differ greatly in matters like these. One group won’t hesitate to eat snails, lizards, eels, etc. while the rest abhor the very thought. Some think nothing of eating dogs or cats while the rest of us recoil at the thought. The same disparity exists over the issue of eating horse meat or snake.

In the strictly sexual area our culture holds nudity to be sinful except between husband and wife, while other cultures have no hang-ups about it. And there are some even who are sensitive to being naked in front of their spouse.

Within our own culture, one group is repulsed at the idea of oral sex while others enjoy it immensely. The same is true of masturbation.

We could multiply examples like these. The point is that the mere fact that we find a practice to be repugnant, in no way justifies categorizing that practice as “sinful.” Nor does it justify marginalizing those who choose that practice. In the above examples, reactions are *culturally conditioned* and for the most part those who differ do so with dignity. What is so hard for us to understand and admit is that our reactions are also culturally conditioned with respect to homosexuality. Yes, even our “Bible based revulsion” to same-sex contact is conditioned by our culture that has been saturated with a legalistic, superficial appeal to a few Biblical texts that were not fully explored, and were not interpreted within their original cultural/historical framework. If we find the thought of same-sex activity repugnant, we owe it to homosexually oriented people to love them, and to express our differences with the same dignity we demonstrate in so many other areas of disagreement. After all, to agree that homosexual orientation is not inherently sinful and is allowed for those who choose it, is not to make a step in the direction of choosing that orientation for oneself. One who thinks it is acceptable for those who want to eat grub-worms to do so, does not thereby suggest that he/she is going to become a “worm-eater.” To admit that polygamy is permissible with God, in no way suggests that one is considering becoming a polygamist. We owe this much to every human: we must love them, (Rom. 13:8). That means that even if we detest what they do,

we must not do or say things about them as persons that harms them, pushes them away or prevents them from living productive lives. We must not oppress them or demand civil restraint upon their lifestyle. We must choose to be kind toward them, as we are kind to others. We must give to them the same grace we trust God to give us.

Sincere Bible students cannot simply brush this question under the carpet. Integrity demands that we deal rigidly with our personal, cultural, historical and religious circumstances and perspectives as we interpret Scripture. If our mind is crammed with ignorance and defensiveness about homosexuality or any other issue we will read texts dealing with those issues in such a way that we will see nothing but what affirms our preconception. Stereotypes and cultural/religious prejudice, have absolutely no place in our minds when trying to glean truth from the Bible. If God indeed does condemn specific homosexual acts, just as He condemns specific heterosexual acts, yet leaves homosexuality *as such* untouched, just as He leaves heterosexuality *as such* untouched, then we are culpable before Him and before humanity if we make laws where God made none, and in the process, bring great social, emotional and spiritual harm to those whom God does not condemn.

The NT church was not very much concerned about homosexuality. Why must we be? All instances in which it is referred to, take the form and language of existing traditions in Greek and Jewish culture. No NT writer considers the issue to be important enough to write even one original sentence about it. Every sentence comes from already established literary and cultural conventions from the immediately surrounding cultures. If female homosexuality was considered a problem, sin or whatever, it is inexplicable that no reference is made to such in the entire Bible. For Paul and his readers, there is only one form of homosexuality to which Paul could have referred, and only two forms of homosexuality which his audience would have understood: pederasty and cultic prostitution. Nothing else is condemned by the NT. This leaves the *general practice of homosexuality* untouched, just as all Scripture leaves the *general practice of heterosexuality* untouched in spite of specific prohibitions of certain *forms* of heterosexuality. What *might* Paul have said about modern expressions of adult/adult mutuality in homosexual

relationship? We shall never know. It is *mandatory* that no one of us attempts to speak for him! The presupposition *must* be that since the entire Bible says nothing at all about such modern homosexual orientation, it is not of concern to God, and therefore should not be of concern to us.

NT theology, specifically Paul's theology leaves us in the same ambiguous position that the modern church finds itself in. This much is clear; at every point from which we approach the Biblical text, the evidence simply is not decisive that the OT or NT condemns consensual homosexual orientation. Theological or ethical assertions about homosexuality without adequate supportive evidence and rationale, will not convince anyone but those who are already convinced. It will suit the purposes of those whose intention is to utterly condemn all homosexual practice, to use whatever references Scripture makes to such practice, regardless of their specifically and provably true import. But for those who are concerned to never condemn anything that God does not condemn, and not to marginalize an entire category of humans without evidence that is convincing "beyond a reasonable doubt," the evidence available appears to us to be compelling. The Bible does not speak *unambiguously* in *any* text, in such a way that allows us to conclude that homosexual orientation as such is inherently defiling and sinful. This requires us to walk in love toward those who walk in this orientation, remembering our lesson from the past regarding women in ministry, slavery and a host of other social issues on which the church was wrong, and committed atrocious sin against millions of women and black people.

We cannot conscientiously accept the view that automatically makes all Biblical prohibitions into eternal moral requirements, independent of their historical and cultural context and regardless of demonstrable linguistic evidence. What the Bible *means to us*, is first of all *what it meant for its original readers*. How we interpret its prohibitions is first of all determined by how they interpreted them in their own concrete situations. Whether those prohibitions have present meaning for us is determined by two conditions: (1) Isolated Biblical statements must be consonant with the larger, major theological and moral judgments that form the heart of the whole of Scripture. (2) The context today must bear a reasonable similarity to the context of the Biblical statements at the time of writing. Only if the context which led to the creation of NT

judgments against homosexuality is similar to the context of the modern “gay movement,” can these NT prohibitions be relevant to our contemporary issue.

Our primary focus in this search for true Biblical morality must focus on the NT rather than the OT. Distinctly Christian theology takes priority over OT theology because the new covenant has replaced the old, and because Jesus Christ, by His death and resurrection brought the Law to an end, (e.g. Rom. 10:4). The church has discarded an immense number of OT laws on the basis that they were culturally conditioned and have no legitimate application either to the church or to our culture.

These conclusions must be accepted whether we are theologically “liberal” or “conservative.” Even if a Biblical ordinance is taken as an eternally valid rule for Christian living, one must first determine *what* it proposes or prohibits. If honest exegesis determines that Gen. 19; Lev. 18, 20; Rom. 1; 1 Cor. 6 and 1 Tim. 1, do not apply to adult/ consensual homosexuality, then those texts immediately become irrelevant for our purpose. Paul’s inspired judgments are indeed eternally valid. But they are valid only against what Paul opposed. If he opposed something *specific*, then his statements cannot honestly be *generalized* beyond the limits of his own intentionally specific use. To do so *at all* violates the integrity of Scripture. To do so *intentionally* after examining the evidence, violates personal integrity and invalidates one’s claim to honest, unbiased Biblical scholarship.

The “Law of Love” Applied To Sex Issues

“There is no Biblical sex ethic. The Bible knows only a love ethic, which is constantly being brought to bear on whatever sexual mores are dominant in any given country, or culture, or period,” (Walter Wink, “Biblical Perspectives on Homosexuality,” *The Christian Century*, Dec. 7, 1979, 1085).

A final aspect of this study requires us to examine homosexuality in light of the “new commandment” uttered by Jesus, and placed in direct connection with all Biblical law. Jesus said His “*new commandment*” is that we “*love one another, just as I have loved you,*” (Jn. 13:34-35; 15:12-17). According to Jesus this law of love is the *interpretive key* to all Biblical ethics. He said that “*all*

the law and the prophets," i.e. the entire corpus of OT legislative and judicial documentation, are dependent upon the commands to "*love God...and to love your neighbor as yourself,"* (Matt. 7:12; 22:36-40; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14).

This key opens to us a more certain way to draw conclusions as to the original intent and to the modern application of all Biblical laws. The rule is essentially this: all Biblical laws are categorized either as prohibitions of what dishonors God, (e.g. by idolatry, blasphemy, rejection of cultural "purity" codes, unbelief, etc.) or what brings harm to other people (e.g. false witness, murder, stealing, etc.). If actions have neither of these negative effects they have no eternal, cross-cultural application. If an act does not violate the integrity, person-hood or property of another person, it is not a sin against a person. If an act does not violate God's nature or dishonor His position as absolute Lord of all, it is not a sin. If an act has no ill effect on one's relationship either with God or man, it is innocent. That act may be engaged in by those who make a voluntary choice to do so. No act is *inherently* unclean or sinful. Paul's statements to this effect are straightforward and compelling. He said "*nothing is unclean of itself,"* (Rom. 14:14, 20; 1 Tim. 4:3-4, 1 Cor. 10:30). What makes an act sinful or "unclean" is its *effect* upon other people or upon God. God's concern in giving all Biblical law is to teach humans how to treat each other with love and how to relate to God properly.

Interpreting moral acts by this rule, we can easily see why specific sex actions are prohibited. Sexuality expressed in idol worship is an offense against God's nature as the One God. Sex acts that exploit others, such as heterosexual rape, homosexual rape, adultery, incest, pederasty, etc., are all sinful *not* because there is something *inherently* wrong with the sex act itself but because those acts are hurtful to people and so are not in harmony with God's requirement that we, "love our neighbor as we love ourselves." Whether addressing homosexuality or heterosexuality, the issue is not the *inherent nature* of the act itself but its *effect* upon other people. As we have said, God is not concerned about sex acts per se. Being Omniscient, God was perfectly familiar with all sexual possibilities before He created sex. He created sex knowing its power and passion. He created sex and gave it to us as His most wonderful gift. It *pleases* God to see His children using His gift of sex. His only requirement is that we not use sex in any way that

dishonors Him or hurts other people. All Biblical prohibitions of sexual activity become understandable when viewed in this light. Thus it is easy to see why pederasty is unsparingly condemned: it violates the person of the young boy by exploiting his immaturity and vulnerability and by disregarding his sexual needs. This allows us also to understand why there is no *demonstrable* reference in all Scripture to female homosexuality. Consensual female-female sexual activity produces nothing inherently harmful to either party. There was nothing, then or now, in female homosexuality that worked harm to other people. This being the case, there simply existed no reason to comment on it at all. In the absence of any Biblical reference to it, God allows female homosexuality for those who choose it.

Try as we might, it is impossible for us to imagine a way in which consensual, mutual, adult/adult same-sex relationships might violate the law of love for others. Indeed, those relationships are by their nature expressions of that very love, just as consensual, mutual, adult/adult heterosexual relationships are expressions of love. If we give full force to the unambiguous statements of Jesus and Paul in this matter, we are compelled to conclude that the law of love, applied to both OT and NT references to homosexuality, means that what both segments of Scripture condemn are expressions of homosexuality that work harm to other people. The additional and necessary conclusion is that if an act, whether heterosexual or homosexual, does not violate the law of love then there is nothing "unclean" in it and it is a matter of individual preference. Applied to specific sex acts, it is obvious to all that the act of a man kissing a woman is innocent. It cannot be therefore *inherently* sinful for a man to kiss a man. The same is true of kissing and fondling a woman's breasts or manipulating her clitoris whether manually or orally. The act itself is innocent. Whether done by man or woman, the act itself is not the issue. What difference does it make to God that a penis is brought to erection and orgasm by either male or female? How does the act itself become sinful on the basis of the gender of the one influencing the climax? Nothing at all in the Bible allows us to conclude that the mere gender of the persons involved is sufficient to make an act sinful. Rather the issue *always* is that of considerate, loving, mutually respectful treatment of those involved. Same-sex prohibitions are given for the same reasons heterosexual

prohibitions are given: the prohibited acts are *harmful to the recipient*. Apart from this consideration there are no prohibitions. According to Jesus and Paul, no law exists on God's books that is independent of this rule: if it hurts others, it is unlawful; if it does not hurt others, it is not unlawful.

Applying the NT "Law of Love" codified by Jesus Christ, requires that we resolve the question of sexual "do's and don'ts," not on the basis of individual laws and codes but on the principle of love for God and love for our neighbor. This requires that we accept sex as Divinely created and recommended as "good," and work from a positive foundation of "sex-as-good" rather than from a negative foundation of "sex-as-dirty." Such a foundation means we must affirm that:

Our whole human body experience, including our sexuality is created as *inherently good*.

Christian fellowship must include all who accept Jesus as their personal Savior, unlimited by purity codes made invalid by Christ's death and resurrection.

Women and men are equal in all aspects of life, especially regarding sex.

Our sexuality may gladly be incorporated as an important component of the reign of God.

Sexual practices characterized by love, justice, equality, fidelity, mutual respect, compassion and grateful joy are good.

We must responsibly avoid any sexual act that degrades, demeans or hurts others.

We must refuse to judge others whose conscience before God does not condemn them in the exercise of that for which they give thanks to God.

(From James Nelson, *Body Theology*, Westminster/John Knox Press, pg. 62)

The moral teaching and ethical guidelines established by Jesus takes the decision about the morality of individual acts out of the realm of *inherent* evil and places the decision in the realm of love. The question we must now ask about all moral issues is not, "Is there a law against this act." Instead we must ask, "Will this act hurt another person in some way." Sexual acts are not to be seen as *inherently* good or bad. Traditional Church dogma notwithstanding, individual sex acts have no *inherent* moral quality. There is nothing

fundamentally dirty about sex – in any form. The “goodness” or “badness” of any act is determined by its *effect* on the persons involved. Does it bring mutual pleasure and satisfaction? Is it done in full consideration for the person-hood, desires and sensibilities of both parties? Does this act minister to the other person’s needs as well as my own? Masturbation, for example, could not possibly be defined as a “sinful act” by *any* Biblical standard since, (1) nowhere in either OT or NT is that act addressed in any way so it cannot be a breach of love for God and since, (2) it is performed *willingly* as an act of *self-pleasuring* that brings no harm to anyone else.

Applied to “adultery” the “law of love” helps refine even more clearly, the answer to the question of “what exactly is adultery?” Adultery is not a sex act per se. Only under specific circumstances does adultery involve a sex act. Adultery is not *inherently* the act of adding a third person’s body into the sexual activity of a married couple. Adultery is the willful and harmful violation (adulteration) of the vows of the original pair. It is both the *desire* and/or the *attempt* to break that original bond. Thus adultery can be and is most often committed in ways that have nothing to do with sex. A jealous or vindictive person who spreads false rumors against a person in hopes of causing that one’s mate to leave, is “adultery.” Any act that results in destroying a marriage union is adultery, even when sex has never been suggested. Thus introducing a third person’s sexuality into the intimate circle of a marriage may not be adulterous at all. Granted, there are risks of jealousy, misunderstanding, etc. involved. But where there is *honesty* and *mutuality* in agreement, meanings and intentions, the participation of a third party does not constitute adultery. If these statements seem to be outrageous, the proof of their accuracy is scattered throughout the OT, which decisively *condemns adultery*, yet *condones polygamy and concubinage*. Indeed, including a third or more parties into a marriage was common practice among God’s choicest servants, (Abraham, Jacob, Gideon, David and many more). In our day, mutual consent to do the same may – and often *does* – manifest a truly deep union of love and trust between the original married couple. Thus applying the “Law of Love” to this issue enables us to determine that when the decision is made by a *consenting* couple to include another person in their love-making, no harm is brought against any of the parties and the act is not a breach of Biblical ethics. If one of the married parties *refuses* to

agree, then to attempt to force a third person into the couplet's intimate relationship, *is* a breach of love and *is* therefore both *adultery* and *sin*.

Our *fundamental* problem with sexual matters is not adultery, homosexuality, pornography, pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex, etc. Our *fundamental* problem is two-fold: (1) conformity to unloving mind-sets that set a norm of unjust compulsory heterosexuality, monogamy and gender inequality; and (2) pursuing sexual activity with a "me only" mind-set that disregards the obligations of love for other persons. Not monogamous heterosexual marriage, but *true love in all sexual relationships*, is morally normative for Christians. Somehow we must escape the strictly *superficial, mechanical* – indeed *legalistic* – mentality that defines sexual morality only in terms of "whose sex organs are being manipulated by whom, and how?" The supreme requirements of love and justice demands *equality* and *mutuality*. We are morally obligated to recognize and promote each other's common decency and personal dignity, and to honor our own and each other's needs for intimacy and affection. Our sexuality is the most fundamental and powerful way we experience emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual communion with others, with the natural world, and with God. Sexual passion and experience gladdens our hearts and ennobles our lives. Sexual morality is defined by the quality of consideration and concern that flows between/among the participants. Sex is just one of the many ways humans interact joyfully, meaningfully and pleurably. Sex is good whenever it is full of mutual love, consideration and equality. No sex act is Biblically ethical if it fulfills the "letter of the law" while dishonoring another person. The husband that *forces* sex upon an exhausted, therefore unwilling wife has breached the law of love and has sinned in spite of the technically "legal" rectitude of his act. The woman who robs her husband of sexual fulfillment by choosing masturbation rather than coitus is likewise guilty. Again: it is not monogamous heterosexuality that is the standard. The standard is: "have the parties involved shown mutual regard for each other's needs and well-being?"

The ethics of Jesus makes it possible for us to celebrate any sexual relationship that deepens human intimacy, mutual pleasure, love, responsibility and justice. To editorialize Jesus' words, "If you had learned what this means, 'I desire truly loving relationships

more than I desire superficial, legalistic submission to sexual law-codes', you would not have condemned the innocent," (after Matt.9:13; 12:7). Or perhaps, "What do I require of you O man, but to promote true sexual intimacy, unselfish pleasure, and mutual fulfillment with your mate?" (after Mic. 6:8). Or again, "You labor over such issues as 'masturbation, oral sex, homosexuality and the like. Though it is right to be concerned about these issues, you don't even notice the deeper and more important matters of sexual justice, mercy, mutuality, compassion and non-judgmental acceptance of other's sexual choices. It is wrong for you to put these weightier matters in second place," (after Matt. 23:23).

Rather than such an ethical foundation promoting licentiousness and "anything goes," it prohibits *from the start* all acts or relationships that in any way wound, abuse, violate or exploit other people. It is, we believe, the only way to incorporate sexual ethics into the plainly stated ethical framework of Jesus Christ who said love for God and love for one's neighbor is the summation of all the law and all the prophets. It fits exactly within the prescription we call "the golden rule:" "*Whatever you desire that men do to you, do that very thing to them, for this is the law and the prophets,*" (Matt. 7:12). This rule allows for all sexual practice that fully considers the other person, while prohibiting all sexual acts that are hurtful, dishonoring or exploitative. Living on the basis of such an ethical system promotes one's own maturity, wisdom and self-respect while manifesting appropriate Godly *agape* to others. It puts Christians on the plane of spiritual responsibility. It fosters adulthood rather than childishness. It encourages growth rather than stagnation. It enables one to live in freedom instead of repression and bondage. Only such a lofty ethical system as this can transcend our traditional *act-centered* sexual ethics, described by someone as, "*the right organ in the right orifice with the right person.*" The "new commandment" ethical system initiated by Jesus Christ makes it possible for free moral agents, possessed of strong sexual proclivities, to live responsibly apart from prohibitive, legal guidelines. If we have love in our hearts we do not need a law-book in our hands, for love fulfills the law.

The church's traditional ethic represented by, "*the right organ in the right orifice with the right person,*" and as well by the phrase, "*celibacy in singleness, fidelity in marriage,*" is woefully inadequate. Though pretending to be thoroughly Biblical, this ethic actually

denies the rich diversity of sexual experiences and relationships that are well documented in Scripture, particularly in the OT. Furthermore, it establishes *illegitimately*, the exclusive claim of heterosexual monogamous coitus to moral propriety and sexual maturity. It focuses on the *form* rather than on the *substance* of sexual relations; on the *outward* rather than the *inward*. It focuses on who does what with whom under what circumstances, instead of asking about the presence of honesty, care, love and respect in sexual relationships. NT ethics identifies “sinful” sexual activity, not in the nature of specific acts; not in terms of whose genitals connect with whose genitals; but in terms of what demonstrates contempt or disregard for other people’s welfare.

If the church is ever to become a place where all-encompassing love manifested in body, soul and spirit, is accepted and made a cause for praising the Creator of sex, the church must honor the goodness of sex and diversity of sexual experience. It must transform its deep fear of sex and body, and repent of its idolatrous fixation with both. In and of itself, sex is the source neither of our salvation nor of our damnation. As in all other ethical issues, it is what is in the *heart* that counts most with God, (1 Sam. 16:7).

Jesus’ own example demonstrates that when the good of others is at stake we are justified in “breaking” even God’s law. The basis upon which this statement rests is the fact that the law was given, not for the sake of law, but for the good of men. It shows us how to treat others with love. Where loving action is performed toward God or toward others the law is fulfilled. This is the reason we must look at *all* laws with a view to see if they fit either the connection of honor given to other men’s persons and property or honor given to God. If a law exists that fits neither category then we treat it as a cultural, temporary law that related to Israel’s particular place in redemptive history and we do not today observe that law because it has served its purpose.

Neither a simplistic, i.e. *superficial*, reading of “what the Bible says” nor a professional reconstruction of the ancient meaning of the texts will provide a prescription for contemporary Christian ethics. For after all else is said and done, we are obligated to view what is said about all sexual possibilities, including homosexuality, through the lens of the highest law of all – the law of love for God and love for man, (Matt. 22:36-40). Whatever has been codified in “*The Law and the Prophets*” is built upon the command to “*love our*

neighbor as we love ourselves." Any attempt to understand laws that govern human life apart from the *foundation* upon which those laws are laid, is to forever mistake the nature and application of those laws.

Using this "Law of Love" as a guideline for determining the acceptability of homosexuality, we would first ask, "Does a willing, consensual same-sex relationship violate love for my neighbor?" The *obvious* answer is "NO!" The remaining question is, "Does such a relationship dishonor God?" Here is the sole ground upon which opposition to same-sex relationships might be based. In order to prove that such relationships dishonor God we must find some proof in Scripture that it is so. Human repugnance does not equal Divine rejection. If God detests homosexuality as much as we have been told, it is passing strange that there is no evidence for such in Scripture. One single reference to *cultic* homosexuality calls it "abomination." But we have seen that "abomination" refers not to the act itself, but to the devotion of that act to pagan gods. *Any* act done in service to pagan gods is "abomination." There is no inherently sexual content in that word. The fact is very plain: No Scripture defines homosexuality as being an offense against God. Therefore same-sex relationships cannot be said to breach the "Law of Love" for God.

With the law of love as a fundamental working base we can easily see why some sex acts are specifically and eternally forbidden. It is because those acts harm other people. We can also see why other sex acts are not forbidden at all. It is because these acts in no way violate love for God or others. We can also understand why some sex acts, though not *inherently* sinful, may *under specific circumstances* be forbidden. It is because the specific circumstance involves violation of the principle of love for God and man.

To illustrate: Sexual activities that are forbidden *under specific conditions*, but *otherwise permitted*, are:

Prostitution: *prohibited only* if done:

In conjunction with worship of idols; – violates love for God.
By married woman in rebellion against her husband; – violates love for husband.

Prostitution is *allowed* as a voluntary activity if it does no harm to another person.

Prostitution *per se* is not condemned in any sense in Scripture. The reason is obvious. Voluntary prostitution in no way violates either love for God or for other people.

Homosexuality: *prohibited only for males, and only if done:*

In conjunction with worship of idols; – violates love for God.
In violation of young boys – “pederasty;” – violates love for others.

As an act of rape; – violates love for others.

Homosexuality as a *voluntary* relationship between informed, consenting adults is allowed.

Homosexuality *per se* is not condemned in any sense in Scripture. The reason is obvious. Voluntary homosexuality that does not exploit others, in no way violates either love for God or for other people.

Heterosexuality: *prohibited* in all circumstances that harm other people.

Rape, incest, adultery are sinful because they violate other people’s well-being.

Withholding sex from one’s partner is sin because it violates his/her needs, (cf. 1 Cor. 7:3-5)

Heterosexual acts used in worship of pagan gods dishonors God.

Heterosexual prostitution by a married woman in violation of her husband’s wishes is adultery.

Heterosexuality as a *voluntary* relationship between informed, consenting adults is allowed.

The debate over homosexuality rages today even though it is apparent that the act itself does no evil either to God or to other people. There is no breach of “love for your neighbor” in the act itself. And given God’s viewpoint of this activity as we have traced it through the Bible, there appears to be nothing *inherent* in the sex act between same-sex partners that violates God’s nature. Our horror over homosexuality is derived from our cultural ignorance and misguided interpretation of Scripture. The truth about God’s will regarding homosexuality is not nearly as “cut and dried” as most Christians want it to be. One thing is certain. The existence of homosexuality and the increasing inroads it is making into the church provides a true proving ground for demonstrating how well

we *understand* and how devoted we are to *practicing* the “law of love.”

One note seems appropriate here concerning the honoring of God’s law-word. God gave this clear direction: “*You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you,*” (Deut. 4:2). The same direction and warning is given in Rev. 22:18, 19, with the threat of God’s judgment upon one who presumes either to add to or detract from what He has written. This means that, with regard to all things surely, but for present purposes, applied specifically to homosexuality:

We have no excuse before God for any attempt to add regulations upon homosexual conduct that God’s own words do not contain.

What God said about homosexuality is sufficient to demonstrate His will. We must, in honor of God and of His word, forbid only those *forms* of homosexuality that God forbids. Whether we like it or not, we must not add our own laws in order to include behavior that God does not address.

We are able to discern the reasons – consistent with the law of love – for such special prohibitions. And we are also able to discern that other forms of homosexuality do not breach this law of love. We are able therefore to draw informed, mature decisions about what appears to be otherwise acceptable activity in God’s view.

We are *obligated, before we decide* on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of homosexuality as such, to do our best at personal, objective study of God’s word. If we are wrong in our conclusions because we did not study, it will not help us to say to Jesus: “But all the preachers said...” Our conscience must truly be *our* conscience. And our conviction must truly be *our personal* convictions. God gives us no permission to live our lives based on other people’s knowledge and faith.

Nothing Is Unclean Of Itself

The apostle Paul made some of the most radical statements we could possibly consider, as relating directly to moral/ethical issues. In light of the legalistic theology that pervades the church, these statements seem almost heretical. Yet those who desire to

understand the truth of the Bible must deal with them honestly and then follow through with necessary application to life situations. Condensed into two fundamental statements, Paul said this:

No act is *inherently* unclean, (or unholy, or defiling, or “nasty,” or “sinful,” etc.).

All acts are *inherently* permissible, (“lawful,” spiritually acceptable, not “sinful”).

Before we consider the actual import of those two ideas, it will help us immensely to focus our attention on the actual words Paul used. Note that Paul writes these statements to five different audiences. The principles he lays down are profound to the utmost in their implications for Christian freedom. Read the following verses carefully to get a sense of how powerful these statements are, then look them up for yourself in their individual contexts.

*“Christ is the end of law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”
“He Himself ...broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh, the enmity, which is the law of commandments contained in ordinances...”*

“I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.”

“All things indeed are clean. But they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense.”

“Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.”

“To the pure all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure.”

“All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.”

“All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify.”

(Rom. 10:4; Eph. 2:14, 15; Rom. 14:14; Rom. 14:20; 1 Tim. 4:4, 5; Titus 1:15; 1 Cor. 6:12; 1 Cor. 10:23).

These verses of Scripture are so profound in both their simplicity and implications, as to almost take one's breath away. These statements are so radically liberating that virtually all commentators struggle to explain them away. For example, Gordon Fee is a conservative Christian Theologian, recognized by scholars worldwide for his brilliant analysis and exegesis of Scripture. He loves God and loves truth, and is perhaps my personal favorite commentator. He makes as good a case for these verses not *meaning* what they actually *say*, as can be made. Regarding the statement that "*all things are lawful...*" (1 Cor. 6:12), he says that it,

"...is almost certainly a Corinthian theological slogan. This is confirmed by the way Paul cites it again in 10:23; in both cases he qualifies it so sharply as to negate it, at least as a theological absolute. The source of the slogan is debatable. Possibly the Corinthians had turned a Pauline position into a slogan for their own purposes. If so, their error would lie in making absolute what for Paul would always have been qualified by his "in Christ" perspective. For him it is only as one is in Christ that "everything is permitted me," and in any case that would have to do with *adiaphora*, (the non-essentials: food, drink, days, circumcision, etc.), not with Christian ethics." (Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 251, 252).

Let us debate these points with brother Fee. If the concept contained in the statement, "all things are lawful for me," had been written only to the Corinthians, we could concede the possibility that the Corinthians had made it up for self-serving purposes. However we feel it is impossible to take this position for these reasons:

The very concept embodied in those words, appears also in Paul's previously quoted statements that:

"I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean."

"All things indeed are clean. But they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense."

“Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.”

“To the pure all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure.”

Thus in five different epistles (Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians, 1 Timothy and Titus), Paul makes exactly the same point. Are we to suppose that the Romans also, and Timothy and Titus had all turned Paul’s theology into mere slogans for self-serving purposes? And how do we offset the fact that Paul says that *“I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself,”* (Rom. 14:14). Paul’s theology here is not his own personal preference. This is revelation from Jesus Christ. When he says, *“all things indeed are clean,”* he is speaking truth, not referring to fabricated slogans.

The statements that label *all* human actions as *inherently “clean,” “pure,” “good”* and *“lawful,”* are built upon the fundamental truth that Jesus Christ ended the rule of laws and commands for believers, (Rom. 10:4; Eph. 2:15). If law no longer rules believers, so that there are simply no laws to break or commands to violate, then it is *automatically true* that *“all things are lawful.”* And since moral impurity comes through violation of God’s law, no act can be viewed as *“impure”* if there are no laws to violate.

It is true that Paul “qualifies” his phrase, but he does so in the immediate context of 1 Cor. 6 and 10, as well as in the contexts of Rom. 14:14, 20, by appealing to Christ’s law of love as that which controls our participation in “lawful” deeds. Paul does not at all negate the freedom granted by his edict that, *“all things are lawful for me.”* He simply urges the Corinthians, as he did the Romans, to consider that while all human action is *inherently lawful*, no act is allowed that violates another human being’s welfare. Thus he appeals to the necessity of self-control so as not to be under the power of any desire such that it would work harm to others by *“wronging”* and *“defrauding”* them, (1 Cor. 6:7-8), or would dishonor God by leading one into *“immorality”* (1 Cor. 6:13ff). He also argues that while all things are indeed lawful, not all things *“edify.”* Therefore we must not use our liberty to do *“all things”* in such a way that others are harmed by our actions, (1 Cor. 10:23-33).

And even though Paul is "*convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean of itself,*" and that "*all things indeed are clean,*" he urges upon the Romans the obligation to control their liberty to pursue "all things," so that none of their brothers and sisters are harmed by unrestrained enjoyment of liberty in Christ, (Rom. 14:14-23). Thus Paul's statement of the radical nature of Christian liberty appears without reservation in these epistles, qualified *only* by his demand that no Christian use personal liberty so as to harm other people or dishonor God through immorality.

If "*all things are lawful*" and "*nothing is unclean of itself...all things indeed are clean,*" then what exactly is "*immorality?*" Quite obviously, "*immorality*" *cannot* be an "*inherently immoral act.*" No act is "*immoral*" if that act does is "*not unclean of itself.*" Immorality is not in the essence of *action*. It is in the essence of *effect* of action. What does no harm to other people and does not dishonor God through blasphemy, false accusation, unbelief, refusing to worship Him, etc. is not immoral.

We agree with brother Fee, that Paul's "in Christ" perspective is indeed the context in which he makes these remarks. Paul's statement is that Christ ended the rule of law only for believers, (Rom. 10:4). Those who are "in Christ" are ruled by Christ's Law of Love, not by a "*law of commandments contained in ordinances.*" Unbelievers are still ruled by law, (cf. 1 Tim. 1:9). Believers are free from law. Therefore it is absolutely true that for believers, "*all things are lawful*" and "*all things are pure.*"

And in light of the context, it is most strange that brother Fee thinks this "slogan" applies only to the "non-essentials, (food, drink, holy days, etc.)" rather than "Christian ethics." Paul is specifically dealing with "immorality," which he enumerates as "*fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, malakos, arsenokoites, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, swindlers...*" (1 Cor. 6:9-10). Are these not matters of "Christian ethics? Indeed they are. Yet in this context wherein Paul deals *especially* with Christian ethics, he both reminds the Corinthians of the basic liberty we have in Christ, ("all things are lawful"), and the responsibility to use that liberty in love, ("not all things are profitable").

One more thought: If the "Corinthians had turned a Pauline position into a slogan for their own purposes," how could they

possibly have thought that Paul had taught such an idea as “all things are lawful?” They must certainly have heard this very concept when Paul was among them, and from reports they heard from other churches where Paul had preached his message of liberty from law under Christ. They had good reason to adopt this “slogan” if indeed that is what it was. Paul’s message to the Romans, the Corinthians, the Galatians, the Ephesians, Timothy and Titus, is all one consistent message: *Christ abolished the rule of legal commands and placed us under the rule of His Royal law of Liberty, (Js. 2:8-12). No act we might do is inherently sinful. We are therefore free to do what we will, self-governed by the law of love.*

The legalistic paradigm that controls so much of our thinking and action is directly challenged by these statements. It is this very legalism that creates the compulsion in our teachers, preachers and commentators to explain away the plain sense of very clear, emphatic statements. Christian leaders have far too much vested interest in controlling the thoughts and actions of the “common Christian,” to be able to accept the idea that all human action is essentially non-spiritual and amoral. They cannot believe and certainly will not teach their people that all human action is inherently innocent. Especially in sexual matters, it is crucial to their concept of “Christian sexual ethics,” that certain acts are just inherently unclean, vulgar, perverted, etc. How else will they be able to brow-beat their church members into avoiding masturbation, oral sex, anal sex, family nudity, erotic materials, sex toys and so forth? In order to deny saints their right to freely choose to enjoy any or all of the above, church leaders must fabricate their own spiritual laws, out of the whole cloth of “some things are just inherently sinful.” And they either never refer to the above Scriptures when they teach, or they simply explain them away if they refer to them at all.

The concept of Christian freedom from law, in the full sense that Paul preached it, is too radical for legalistic leaders of a legalistic church. But Paul taught that believers are no longer obligated to obey Bible commands. He and Christ taught that the great benefit of the cross is that believers are relieved of a, “burden which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear,” (Acts 15:10). Instead of burdening us with a new set of “commands and ordinances,”

Jesus gave us only one basic law. He commands us to “*Love God and our neighbor.*” (Jn. 13:34). This is the “Law of Christ.” Simply absurd? No: just absurdly simple. And ultimately livable. We can live with this “law.” But this means that we spend no more time memorizing commands and working hard to obey them. It means that we now think carefully and lovingly about how our actions might affect God and neighbor. Following Christ is a “simple”(?!?) matter of not doing what breaches love for God and man. *Any act is permissible* as long as love is honored.

We must learn to think more seriously about what it means to us that Christ put an end to the rule of law and set us free from a life of obeying commands and ordinances. Since the rule of law is ended and commandment keeping is no longer the path to holiness, then it is literally true that *no act is inherently sinful, unclean or defiling.* This means that *any act is inherently* innocent, lawful and permissible for those who choose to enjoy that act. Something other than the act itself must enter the picture in order to make any act “unlawful thus “sinful” and “unclean.”

According to Jesus and Paul, the thing that makes any act sinful, is the *harmful effect* of that act upon others or upon God. Innocent acts become sinful acts when those acts harm others. Read these statements:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend the whole law and the prophets.”

“He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law...Love does no wrong to a neighbor, love therefore is the fulfillment of the law.”
(Matt. 22:37-40; Rom. 13:8, 10; cf. Gal. 5:14; Matt. 7:12; Jn. 13:34; Js. 2:8)

Putting these two categories of Scripture together produces this principle:

No act is sinful in itself. Any act becomes sinful only when that act violates God’s law of love by hurting one’s neighbor or dishonoring God. Therefore it is lawful for one to do anything one desires to do, as long as one does not violate love for God and neighbor.

(This concept is developed extensively in the book, *The Royal Law of Liberty: Living In Freedom Under Christ's Law of Love*, available at www.trafford.com)

Human life is radically affected by these truths. Every good thing in God's creation is available for humans to enjoy, with thankfulness to our Divine Benefactor. No good thing is left out. In the above-mentioned book, a large number of specific actions are examined in light of this principle. But here, our singular purpose is to look at the impact this has for our consideration of homosexuality.

According to the preceding Scriptures, *all* human biological acts are *inherently amoral*. There is nothing *inherently* either good or bad about any human body function. By legislation God controls certain body functions only insofar as they encroach harmfully upon others. *No* sex act is *inherently* unclean, unholy or sinful. Sin attaches to a sex act only if it harmfully affects other people or dishonors God. Only on that basis does God legislate against a sex act. This means that masturbation, oral sex and anal sex are all inherently innocent. This also means that there is no such thing in God's mind as "a filthy homosexual act." God does not view homosexual acts in a category apart from all else. Scripture says, "*Nothing* is unclean in itself...*all* things are pure," "All things are lawful..." etc. Therefore the *pronouncement of Scripture* is that, "homosexual acts are not unclean in themselves...homosexual acts are pure." "Homosexual acts are lawful." Read that again in light of the Scriptures we quoted. Read it until you are able to agree with what these Scriptures teach us about *the inherent purity of all acts*, including homosexual acts.

Nothing about a sex act between two men or two women is *inherently* dirty. A same-sex couple performs basically identical physical acts that heterosexual couples perform. A prostitute does the same acts with her clients as are otherwise done in "acceptable" relationships. It is not the *acts themselves* that are immoral. If the act itself is not "unclean" then what makes legislation necessary? It is either that the act dishonors God or harms another person. God gave such legislation against the specific expressions of homosexuality and prostitution that He deemed necessary, leaving the other expressions of homosexuality and prostitution untouched. This is sufficient for those who desire only to know

what God wills. If other forms of homosexuality and prostitution were equally repugnant to God, He would have said so. Since God did not say so, we must refuse to do so. While this will mean nothing in terms of affecting the lifestyle of most of our readers, it will *directly affect* the *attitude* of *all* of us toward those who choose either of these lifestyles. If God *does not* condemn it, we *cannot*. We must exercise love and acceptance of such people in the same way Jesus showed compassion and love and acceptance toward such people in His day. As God grants grace to us, so we must grant grace to others, even when they live in ways of which we disapprove.

The attitude has been ingrained in us, by the church and society, that homosexuality and prostitution are *inherently* unclean. Paul says this is not so. We can, if we will, escape this unBiblical, unloving mindset. And we *must* do so. We cannot truly honor God's law otherwise.

Sex and Vulnerability

One of the primary reasons for prohibitive commandments relating to sex is that the power and passion of sex so easily and quickly *uses* other people for strictly selfish passion. Often this passion loses sight of the other person's dignity, welfare and needs, and especially their vulnerability. Women are too easily victimized by men, and children are virtually helpless against the sexual advance of adults and even by their own peers. The vulnerability factor is especially strong within family relationships and is doubtless the primary reason for laws against incest. Thus in the OT God prohibited sexual conduct that would victimize others. In NT ethics, those laws are not needed simply because love as the motivating force in all relationships automatically ministers sympathetically to the vulnerability of others rather than taking advantage of that vulnerability.

Sex And Single People

Special attention should be given to the sexual needs of single people. Standard church dogma remains, "singles, thou shalt not." Yet not even in the legalistic inclined OT theology, is such stringency mandated for the single person. People are not devoid of

desire or need for sexual activity merely because they are single. It is neither compassionate nor Biblical to tell them that they must “be celibate or go to Hell.” If sex is a gift from God, it is as much a gift to single people as to married people. Sex is “good” for the single as for anyone else. What we need is a loving approach to single people that opens the door to sexual activity while teaching them their personal obligation to “love” those with whom they are sexually engaged. This means that single people must understand the obligations of love that arise in consideration of such issues as possible pregnancy and venereal disease, honesty regarding intentions, and so forth. If Biblical *agape* guides the single person, sex is no more withheld from him/her than for married people.

Church tradition holds that heterosexual marriage is the only righteous venue for sexual expression. Church dogma on this matter can be stated thusly: “Yes, sex is a gift from God and is a legitimate pleasure for men and women, but heterosexual marriage is the only provision God gives for its expression.” This concept is stated with such force and confidence that one expects to be able to read such a statement in Scripture. But there is no such statement. People *interpret* certain Biblical statements to “mean” this, and then they bind this personal interpretation upon all others as Divine law. Let us be clear: The “*sexual activity only within the confines of heterosexual, monogamous marriage*” dogma, **rests on no more substantial foundation than subjective human interpretation!** This dogma is *human conclusion*, not *divine statement*. All the arguments from Scripture presented by the whole gamut of Christian theologians fail to provide a satisfactory and clearly demonstrable explanation of why sexuality must be expressed only within monogamous marriage. This concept is *read into* Scripture. It is not *derived from* Scripture. Some more “liberal” ones will go so far as to admit the permissibility of “pre-ceremonial” sex between engaged couples, while yet inconsistently holding firmly to the “marriage only” ethic. No satisfactory reasons are given for this position. Indeed, such a position denies the reality expressed by dozens of Biblical passages that demonstrate various circumstances in which sex was enjoyed *outside* marriage and with apparent Divine *approval*.

The Song of Solomon details in sexually graphic fashion, the passion of a woman and man who delight in their sexuality. Their sex is neither “marital” nor “pre-ceremonial.” Their purpose in sex

is not to have children. Their delight in one another is simple passion and pleasure – pure, holy, delightful passion. Though not using the vulgarisms so commonly used today, this poem paints delightful word pictures of the male and female bodies, including the sex organs. There is in this poem no fear of passion, no shame at sexual delight. The Song of Solomon is God’s tribute to the delightfulness and importance of sexual desire as part of His “good” creation. That its two primary actors are not married is telling in profoundly significant ways.

Today young people are refusing the church’s and society’s taboos on pre-marital and extra-marital sex. And well they should. We are not saying that people have license to run amok and exercise no restraint. But single people have no responsibility to honor taboos that have no genuine foundation in God’s word. The issue of “promiscuity” is important. However, no Divine guidance exists for defining exactly at what point sexual activity become “promiscuous.” The Bible also condemns “drunkenness” but gives no guideline for determining exactly at what point one becomes “drunk.” God requires responsible individuals to exercise *self-restraint* in using alcohol. God also condemns gluttony yet He gave no Biblical guideline for deciding when occasional over-eating becomes gluttony. We may enjoy good food and lots of it, but we are required to exercise personal discipline and self-restraint. The same principle is true of sex. To define as “promiscuous” *any* sex outside marriage is absurd. Unfortunately there is no word that describes a middle ground between “promiscuous” and “chaste.” Surely it is time for us to attempt to exercise loving, compassionate concern for the needs of single people. Can it be right to require single people to totally subjugate a passion they feel every bit as strongly as do married people? Can we find courage to tell them that the ethics of Jesus requires only that they exercise responsible self-restraint in sex as in all other things? And can we tell them that the ethics of Jesus requires them to engage others sexually in full consideration for the other person’s needs, desires and well being? Can we, in fact, *trust Jesus* when He tells us that His “law of love” will serve us better than all the commandments ever written?

The distinctive element of Christian morality is the primacy of Christ’s love command. The first spiritual requirement is that we must be completely devoted to God. Then we are required to love people and be devoted to their welfare, (Matt. 22:37-40). This love –

agape – is not a human emotion or sentiment. It is not based on whether we like or dislike a person, or whether we agree or disagree with their life-style. It is a standard to which all our attitudes and conduct must conform. This love is not conditioned on expectations of reciprocity or evaluations of a person's worthiness. We are told to love our enemies: a standard of conduct that transcends customary rules of morality, (Lk. 6:27-33). It is not an easy moral command to obey. It requires that we rise above and reach beyond personal, selfish desires, to *value* other people properly and actively even if they are enemies. Jesus requires us to embrace a morality that requires a constructive, compassionate, unconditional and concrete commitment to other people and their needs.

This *agape* is especially needed as the spiritual venue in which discussion is conducted about the viability of various sexual expressions such as singles-and-sex, homosexuality, prostitution, polygamy, masturbation and perhaps others. It is good and right that forceful, passionate argumentation is brought to bear on all such issues. But mutual respect between people holding differing opinions and toleration of reasoned and reasonable moral and spiritual differences will facilitate resolution of even the strongest arguments. Recognition that not one of us is infallible, will eliminate the hardheaded and self-righteous demands that others either agree with our conclusions or go to Hell. Self-conscious fallibility will enable us to listen to others sympathetically rather than judgmentally. Love will help us accept the reality that we are all subject to self-righteousness and unjust intolerance. Knowledge of right and wrong, like knowledge of God, is imperfect and is in the process of being refined in all of us. Despite the high confidence we place in personal religious beliefs and the moral judgments derived from them, these beliefs and judgments should always be held with a loose grip. People of faith should remain open to new insights into the nature and will of God, and to new understandings of right and wrong. If God's revelation were subject to perfect comprehension, and if humanity had perceived all of God there is to understand, then none of us would need to read the Bible anymore. Theological and Biblical studies are continually clarifying the meanings and applications of authoritative sources with respect to God, humanity and the relation of each to the other. Faith is neither knowledge nor

certainty. What understanding any of us have, on *any* issue, is incomplete and we must take the rest by faith. Our present concepts do not constitute all truth. For Christians, human agape supercedes all other rules of conduct. If we cannot *embrace* these concepts and *operate* by them, then we have no defensible reason to study Scripture any longer. The very practice of study implies the reality that we do not possess all knowledge. It also implies that what we think we know may be wrong after all.

In generations not far removed from our own, we subjected black people to the most horrible injustices imaginable. Our open, even proud contempt for them as a class was exemplified by the special words we used to identify and to insult them: "nigger" "spook" "coon" etc. For years the church held within its bosom many "scholars" who believed and taught *from the Bible*, that black people were subhuman, made to be slaves, the descendants of either Cain or Canaan whose blackness was inherited through the curse God put upon those men for their sins. As the world excluded them from social and economic equality and opportunity, so did the church exclude them from full Christian fellowship and spiritual opportunity. They were required to sit in the back of the bus and in the back of the church. Slowly we grew to understand the hideous nature of what we were doing and black people began to be invited into white churches by a few daring leaders. Many churches experienced bitter division as some accepted their black "brethren" and others continued to reject them on "Biblical" grounds. Ever so slowly change has come, though we are still far away from dealing with black people righteously. The point here is that what we passionately held as deeply rooted, genuine religious conviction, brought horrible injustice upon a whole race of people. We had to repent of wrongly held and hurtful values.

Women have suffered for ages from the patriarchal stranglehold men have on society and the church. They have been relegated to the backwaters of every aspect of society and religious life. Women still do not receive equal pay for equal work. Women once were not allowed political office. Women in many instances were not even allowed to obtain a college education. Women were used as possessions and child-factories. It was a matter of pride for a man to "keep the little woman barefoot and pregnant." Their status was little better than slaves, subject to the whims and demands of their husbands and virtually all other males. We also had special words

by which we demonstrated our contempt for women. If we wanted to insult a man, we called him a "sissy" or "pussy." We accused him of wearing "panties." We would verbally abuse a woman by calling her a "bitch," "slut" or a "cunt." The church contributed to this sinful gender bias through Bible exposition and teaching (all done by *men*) that held women to be "in subjection to the man," by which they meant that women, *as a class*, were inferior to men and not deserving of the same consideration, opportunities, etc. as were men. Once again, slowly, the church began to learn better and what was passionately held dogma in all churches, has gradually, and in many cases grudgingly, given way to the realization that women are viable participants not only in society, the workplace and government, but also in the church. We had to repent of wrongly held and hurtful values.

Now the church and society are waging a great war against homosexuality. Again, we have our special words of contempt and insult: "queer," "faggot," "cock-sucker," "dyke," "butch," etc. Homosexuals have suffered at the hand of society and the church in horrible ways. In our own generation we have witnessed many examples of gay-bashing and even murder of homosexuals. They are discriminated against in the workplace, in government and in many other segments of society. But it is the church that most vociferously and violently damns them. As always, there is impassioned appeal to Scripture for the justification of unloving, unjust, inhumane, inconsiderate treatment of these human beings. We say their sin justifies our hateful treatment of them. Yet again, the church, through continued study and learning is, with agonizing slowness, seeing that it may possibly be as wrong about homosexuality as it was about women's rights and black people's rights. Teachers, preachers and theologians are doing better research and seeing more light. A few of them are demonstrating immense integrity and exercising great courage to go public with what they are finding. Consequently churches are slowly beginning to show *agape* to homosexually oriented people. So much work and progress needs to occur, but at least the beginnings are here. The church will doubtless one day own up to its error and sin in this matter as it has had to do on other issues. We will have to repent of wrongly held and hurtful values. Love – agape – demands that we do so.

A study of all God's laws regarding sex reveals His basic concern. God was neither afraid of sex nor fearful that His people might actually enjoy sex. The erotic joy and power inherent in sexuality is God's wonderful design. God *expects* us to enjoy sex. We honor God when we thrill at sexual pleasure. Evaluating God's written will regarding all things sexual leads us to the conclusion that sexual morality or immorality is never a matter of what specific *acts* are acceptable or unacceptable. Rather sexual morality or immorality is an expression either of loving or of hurtful human *relationships*. Relationships are moral when they are mutual, supportive of the full personal growth of each person, committed to the needs of each other, and faithful to each other. Relationships are immoral when they are abusive, violent, exploitative, prevent people from developing and lead to lying, deceit and betrayal.

This norm of sexual morality based on loving relationships eliminates the neat boundaries between moral and immoral sex that are so important to church leaders and civil authorities who feel compelled to keep everyone in proper moral alignment through legislation of morality. Procreation in heterosexual, monogamous marriage ceases to be *the standard* by which all sexuality is measured. What is moral or immoral sexually becomes more a question of a scale of values than of clear boundaries. A relationship based on love rather than commands and laws promotes development in the lovers. We are able to grow toward healthy, loving, supportive, mutual relationships, and away from abusive and dishonest ones. The morality of homosexual relationships is to be based on the same standard as, and judged equally with heterosexual relationships. And the question of the morality of polygamy and prostitution are likewise to be judged by the standard of love, not rules. Additionally, the practice of masturbation, oral sex, use of sex toys, erotic materials, consensual extra-marital sex and sex by single people, are judged by the same standard. What works no harm to others is not forbidden. Those who prefer to enjoy those practices may do so.

Sexual orientation then, does not *by itself* determine a person's capacity for love, beauty and joy. Sexual orientation does not *by itself* define one's relationship with God. The homosexuality with which we are today concerned, especially within Christian groups, is that of caring, mutually loving relationships between consenting adults. In these relationships there is no hint of exploitation or

injustice. While it is true that there are dehumanizing aspects of modern homosexuality, it is also true that there are dehumanizing aspects of modern heterosexuality. There is sexual sin among homosexuals just as there is sexual sin among heterosexuals. But as with heterosexuality, a homosexuality that produces faithful, tender, respectful, hopeful and mutually fulfilling acts is an instrument of love, beauty and joy. As such it is in full harmony with both the first and second greatest commandments in Scripture: love God and love your neighbor. As such it is moral.

It is vastly important to all of us that we remember and practice what Paul implies in 1 Cor. 13:12, 13. The greatest of all spiritual qualities is love. It will endure forever. Love is greater than judgment, than personal opinions, than condemnation, than all other considerations. Far better it is to love a person who is palpably wrong, than to condemn or accuse. We do not have all the answers and we never will unless somehow we become infallible. And we have made too many mistakes in the past by interpreting Biblical statements exclusively in the light of our own modern cultural and ecclesiastical context. We have hurt too many people by establishing unbreakable rules on the flimsy foundation of our fallible and often gullible understanding. In doing so we have subjected millions of innocent people to horrible suffering, whose only offense is in being born either female, or with black skin. We must cease committing the same sins against homosexual people, especially in light of the absence of unambiguous Biblical evidence. God requires of us the same grace toward others that He has exhibited toward us. Of all laws, rules, and ethical standards that have ever been given, there is only one that is eternal. Standing above even faith and hope, the greatest of all is love. In the midst of trying to discern what God does and does not allow ethically, we cannot be excused if we violate the greatest and most unambiguous command of all. We must love one another. We must love the homosexual. Even if we cannot personally agree that homosexuality is permitted except in its hurtful forms, we must yet relate to the homosexual in love just as we must even to an "enemy." At the very least this means that we must, in light of the ambiguous nature of Biblical references to homosexuality, not exclude homosexuals from participation in the church, must not relegate them to "second-class" status and must make overt attempts to relate to them in loving, encouraging ways. As God has

so freely given grace to we who are so utterly undeserving, so must we be willing to give grace to those whom we consider to be utterly undeserving. To do otherwise closes off any legitimate expectation we may have of obtaining future grace.

Transparently and Biblically stated, our proposition is this: Within the parameters of true love for God and fellow men, we are free to enjoy our sexuality as *fully* as we desire, in the *manner* we desire and *with whom* we desire. Loving God means that we sanctify sex by thanking Him for it and honoring His requirement that we treat others as we desire to be treated. Loving others means that we treat them with respect and dignity, that we demonstrate concern for their welfare, that we do nothing that compromises their safety and well-being or takes advantage of their vulnerability.

The law of love thus opens sexual expression to single people, homosexuals, couples who desire to include others into their partnership whether permanently or short term, and prostitutes by choice. It allows masturbation, oral sex, and the voluntary use of erotic writings, photos and films as means of sexual stimulation. It allows voluntary use of "sex toys" such as vibrators for sexually stimulating oneself or one's lover. It allows playing sexually with others who volunteer to play. It allows people to enjoy this gift of sex without shame and fear.

Doubtless that was God's original intention.

(This last segment reprinted from *Divine Sex*, also by Philo Thelos.)

Other books by the author of *God Is Not A Homophobe*:

The Royal Law of Liberty, by Darwin Chandler. (Trafford Publishing, 488 pg; available at trafford.com and amazon.com). This book cuts the root of all illegitimate religious rules, bringing true freedom for humans to enjoy all things good, without shame or guilt. This lengthy argument establishes the "Law of Love" as the only religious/spiritual law binding upon those who desire to please God. Its premise is vital to understanding the needed basic approach to all moral issues. It deals a deathblow to the scourge of legalism that pervades all modern "Christian" churches.

Divine Sex, by Philo Thelos. (Trafford Publishing, 308 pg; available at trafford.com and amazon.com). God does not hate sex. God loves sex, and created it for the exquisite pleasure of His children. Far from condemning all sex except heterosexual monogamy in the missionary position, the Bible actually celebrates sex in the widest range of expressions imaginable. This book will set readers free from illegitimate church taboos, and allow them to enjoy sex with many people in many ways, without guilt or shame.

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