

Homosexual Christians



Also by Gregory S. Neal

Grace Upon Grace
Seeking the Shepherd's Arms

Homosexual Christians:

What the Bible Does *NOT* Say

Gregory S. Neal

Grace Incarnate Ministries Press

Mesquite, Texas

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Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

Romans 5:1-2

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Preface

This little book would not have been possible without the friendship, love, and support of many people. I would particularly like to thank my several editors – both laity and fellow clergy – who graciously took the time to read and critique portions of this work as it went through many incarnations from research notes to paper to book. Each of you knows who you are, and what you did, and I thank you for your patience, your grace, and your willingness to deal, honestly and openly, with these difficult concepts. I especially want to thank those who encouraged me to “keep it readable.” It’s not easy to write about these topics; to do so in a way that is clear, straightforward, and non-pretentious has been a real challenge.

It has also been difficult to write on this topic without becoming judgmental of people on *both* sides of the debate in the process; when and where I may have failed to express myself with Christian charity, I offer my sincere apologies. It should be understood that my position on several points changed through the course of researching and writing this book. It has not been a comfortable experience, but it *has* been a greatly rewarding one. It *is* somewhat disconcerting, however, to realize that the simple paper which I had intended to write was *not* what my research eventually led me to produce. Chalk it up to serendipity, if you wish, but I prefer to believe that the Holy Spirit had something to do with it.

Finally, I would like to thank you, my gentle readers, for being willing to consider the thoughts that are presented within these narrow covers. This little book is intended to be nothing more than an overview of the Biblical passages which relate to homosexuality. So much more could be, and has been, written about this topic. If this book manages to spark even just a general interest in reading and studying the Scriptures, it will have served its purpose. If it challenges and inspires its readers to new thoughts and new perspectives, it will have gone beyond my hopes and dreams.

All that I ask is that, as you read, you might allow the Grace of God to inspire within you a spirit of charity and an open soul. As Christians who are charged with embodying the Real Presence of Jesus to a broken and hurting world, we can do no less. Indeed, as a people of the Book we are *called* do no less. And, I trust, as a people of faith we *shall* do no less.

May the peace of the Lord be always with you.

G.S.N+

Chapter One

The Question

“What does the Bible say about homosexuality?”
“Is it possible to be homosexual and a Christian?”
“What did Jesus have to say about homosexuality?”
“Isn’t homosexuality a sin?”

There isn’t a segment of the Church which hasn’t been impacted by questions such as these. The morality of homosexuality and of homosexual behavior – indeed, the place of homosexuals in the life of the Church¹ – has been hotly debated by people on all sides of the question. And, while it is true that there has been a growing tolerance for diversity in many parts of the Church, there is still a harsh, persistent, negative response which can be found even among some of the most accepting main-line denominations. It is a response which excludes the homosexual, even while expressing recognition of the human worth and civil rights of such individuals. In effect, the response has been “We want to love and support homosexuals ... but let’s do so from a distance.”

Indeed, among many Christian denominations the response hasn’t been nearly so accepting. Throughout a large portion of the Church answers to the above questions have been so hostile and so exclusive that it would not be exaggerating to say that a whole new Christian mythology has arisen ... a mythology which claims that the Bible condemns to hell all modern-day homosexuals. This myth is so powerful, and so pervasive, that one rarely hears – and can be afraid to voice – anything to the contrary. And, yet, the truth is so remarkably contrary to this myth that even many who would love to hear differently find it impossible to believe that the Bible is entirely silent on the matter. That’s correct, silent. The Bible says *nothing* about modern-day homosexuality; nor does it consign all modern-day homosexuals to hell.

“But, what about Sodom and Gomorrah; what about the Old Testament prohibitions in Leviticus; what about Paul’s condemnation of homosexuality in 1 Corinthians and Romans? Aren’t all of these proof that the Bible declares homosexuality a sin, and homosexuals sinners?”

The purpose of this book is to answer these questions, in accordance with sound exegetical² principles, as precisely and as completely as possible. In the past, many books and articles on this topic have been written which give great weight to the discoveries of science and sociology; but it is not the author’s intention to make more than a passing reference to such studies. Rather, the focus of this book is on the *Bible*, and what can be said about Homosexuality from the Biblical witness. What does the Bible have to say? And, more importantly, what does the Bible *not* say?

¹ Throughout this book, when and where the term “Church” is used without qualification, the author intends that the concept of the “Universal Church” of Jesus Christ, which knows no walls or denominations – the totality of all believers – be understood.

² “Exegesis” is an explanation or interpretation of a text; from the Greek word *exegeisthai*, meaning “to explain.”

Chapter Two

The Old Testament

To what extent does the Hebrew Bible (and, specifically, the Torah) address the issue of Homosexuality? Where are these references to be found, and how are they to be understood? To answer these questions one must first be aware of the nature of the literature to be found in the Hebrew Bible, the reasons why its many books were written, and the overriding purpose behind the legal code of the Israelites. While an in-depth address to these issues is not possible within the confines of this book, a few words of explanation for each can and should be given.

The Old Testament is far more than the law, it is an account of the Hebrew people's encounter with God and their understanding of how God expected them to relate to each other and with the Divine. It is a collection of stories and histories, tales and legends, ritual purity codes and moral dictums, all of which served to differentiate the Hebrews from the other people who lived around them. They were to be different from everyone else, and by their difference they were to be recognized as the people of Yahweh.

For example, they abided by a strict religious code, one which denied the very essence of other religions, and they viewed the maintenance of ritual purity, and particularly blood and fluid purity, as being of *principle* importance. One simply didn't mix one's fluids, from saliva to blood, with someone else's unless that mixing was done within the context of a sanctioned covenant (i.e., marriage). One didn't consume certain kinds of foods, or *any* meat with fat or blood in it, for in so doing one would become unclean. Likewise, one maintained a strict code of ethics in dealing with others; one was called to be hospitable to strangers, to help the poor by leaving one's fields only partially harvested so that those who had nothing could eat, and to be respectful to elders and one's brothers and sisters.

The purpose of the legal code throughout the entire Old Testament was to maintain ritual purity ... this goes for both the dietary regulations as well as for what many people have come to consider the "moral" code. Ritual purity is the source for the *entire* Hebrew ethic ... and for a very good reason; one who is ritually impure is disqualified from approaching God. This must be understood: there is *no such thing* as a Biblical moral code divorced from ritual purity.

With this important information in mind, let us now move on to examine the Old Testament passages which have been viewed as having something to say concerning Homosexuality: the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the Torah Code prohibitions in the Book of Leviticus.

Sodom and Gomorrah

Over the last few centuries the traditional explanation for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah has been God's wrath against the sin of homosexuality. This interpretation points to the "men of the city" who surrounded the house where two visitors had come to stay with Abraham's nephew, Lot. These visitors were actually angels sent by God to guide Lot and his family safely out of the city. According to the traditional view, the men surrounding the house

had come to have “sexual relations” with the visitors and, so, God poured out fire and brimstone to destroy those who wished to commit this horrible sin. As a result, the understood sin of Sodom, as communicated to us through this traditional interpretation, has taken the name “sodomy”³.

Until the recent discovery of several important archeological sites near the Dead Sea, the scientific community viewed the story of Sodom and Gomorrah with a great degree of skepticism. However, with recent discoveries we now know that these two cities were located on what was, at that time, a fertile plain, and that their people were blessed with great prosperity ... prosperity not shared by the surrounding areas which were primarily desert. Under these circumstances it is easy to understand how the people of Sodom and Gomorrah became notorious for being self-centered isolationists who were both suspicious of, and inhospitable to, strangers. Since travel was very dangerous and, for the most part, hotels or other lodging were not readily available, a lack of hospitality was considered a major social *faux pas*.⁴ And, contrary to the traditional interpretation, there is strong biblical evidence to support the contention that *this* is the reason God destroyed them.

One principle method of Biblical exegesis is commonly known as “letting the Bible interpret itself.” In other words, if homosexuality is the reason for God’s judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, other Biblical references to the event will confirm it. The prophet Ezekiel relates the reason for the destruction thusly:

Now this is the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.⁵

While this passage says nothing about homosexuality, or sexuality of any kind, as the reason for the destruction of these cities, it does specify arrogance and a lack of concern for others. In other words, Ezekiel clearly teaches that a lack of hospitality was the *key* reason for God’s judgment.

³ According to *Webster’s*, either “copulation with a member of the same sex or with an animal,” or “noncoital and esp. anal or oral copulation with a member of the opposite sex.” This definition first appeared in Middle English from French and Latin in the 13th Century and is based entirely upon the traditional interpretation of Genesis 19.

⁴ Indeed, so important was the principle of hospitality that it was eventually incorporated into the Torah. For an example, see Deuteronomy 10:19

⁵ Ezekiel 16:49-50

Many commentators have suggested that homosexuality must be implied from Ezekiel's general reference to "detestable things." According to this argument, even though homosexuality isn't named as such, the context of the story in Genesis demands its inclusion. Unfortunately, upon a closer examination of both the Genesis account and of the many scriptural lists of "detestable things," the suggestion fails the crucial Biblical test. As we shall momentarily see, not only does the context *not* demand its inclusion, it is amazing to note that homosexuality is conspicuously *absent* from even the most famous catalog of "detestable things," Proverbs 6:16-19.

"There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers."⁶

This list of "Deadly Sins" is of extreme importance because the behaviors listed here are destructive to healthy personal relationships as well as to the life of a community. And, yet, homosexuality is not listed as being among the things that the Lord "hates." Indeed, scripture doesn't give any justification to the oft-made assumption that the "detestable things" must have included homosexuality.

This does not mean that sexual sins were not occurring in Sodom and Gomorrah. The intention of those who had gathered around Lot's house was to have sex with Lot's visitors (who, let us not forget, were angels disguised as men). The normal term for what these people wanted to do to these visitors is *gang rape*. They were not seeking consensual sex; they were seeking to *abuse* them.⁷ And yet, this by itself was *not* the reason for the destruction of Sodom: the Lord had *already* determined to destroy the city. That was why the angels were sent to retrieve Lot in the first place.⁸

Another Biblical reference to the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah can be found in the New Testament book of Jude:

⁶ Proverbs 6:16-19. See also the author's chapter: "The Seven Deadly Sins" in *Seeking the Shepherd's Arms*. (Kearney: Koinonia Press, 2003).

⁷ Since the visitors were actually messengers from Yahweh, it is possible that the people of Sodom wanted to use them as sexual sacrifices to their gods.

⁸ See, especially, Genesis 18

Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.⁹

Jude says that the people had gone after “strange flesh,” which some interpreters have concluded *must* reference homosexuality. The translation “strange flesh” is based upon the Greek term *heteros sarx*, which literally means “different flesh.” Had Jude intended homosexuality, it is more likely that he would have used a term like *homos sarx*, or “same flesh.” Since he doesn’t, it is rather more likely that his focus here is upon the people’s desire to have sex with angles – certainly, that would be an example of going after “strange flesh.”

In the Synoptic Gospels¹⁰ Jesus indirectly commented on the sin of Sodom when he instructed his disciples on how they were to respond to rejection:

If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.¹¹

Though it is not directly stated, the implication here is nevertheless strong: Jesus says that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of their lack of hospitality, and that the same judgment will come upon those who reject the Gospel.

The traditional interpretation of this story stems from the incorrect translation of the Hebrew word *enoshe*. Most versions render *enoshe* in Genesis 19 as “men”.

Before they had gone to bed, all the *men* from every part of the city of Sodom - both young and old - surrounded the house.¹²

The problem is that the Hebrew word *enoshe* is *not* gender specific and does *not* mean “men” or “a bunch of men.” Rather, it is both plural and gender neutral, meaning: “people.”¹³ If gender specific terminology had been intended, the word *ish* would have been used for “man” or *ishah*

⁹ Jude 7, *KJV*

¹⁰ Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

¹¹ Matthew 10:14-15; see also Mark 6:11 and Luke 10:12

¹² Genesis 19:4

¹³ Francis Brown; S.R. Driver; Charles Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew And English Lexicon*. (New York: Peabody Hendrickson, Publishers, 1979.)

for “woman.” This mistranslation gives the impression that just the men of the city had surrounded Lot’s house and that they were all homosexuals desiring sex with the angels. However, this is totally incorrect. The use of the gender-neutral term leaves us no alternative but to recognize that the people of Sodom – men *and* women – were demanding to rape the visitors. This observation makes Lot’s alternative to them even more interesting.

Lot offered them his two virgin daughters to rape if only they would leave him and his visitors in peace. Lot is referenced in 2 Peter 2:8 as “a righteous man,” and yet he offered his daughters to be raped by both men *and* women? Now, granted, according to the cultural standards of his day Lot was doing the honorable thing: he was sacrificing his daughters in order to save his guests. To us, this seems reprehensible; however, we must remember that in their culture women were of little value. If their rape would save his visitors, Lot’s honor and the requirements of hospitality demanded that the sacrifice be made.¹⁴

The error of the traditional translation can be seen further demonstrated in the other uses of the word *enoshe* throughout the Hebrew Bible. For example:

And Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all that were born in his house, and all that were bought with his money, *every male among the men* of Abraham's house; and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the selfsame day, as God had said unto him.¹⁵

Here, *enoshe* is used with the word *zechar*, which means specifically “male.” The problem with the above translation is obvious: what other kind of *men* are there but *males*? In point of fact, Abraham was selecting the males from among all the “**people**” of his household for circumcision. The more modern translations corrected the KJV’s erroneous reading of Genesis 17:23 to indicate people or household, but they failed to make the same correction for Genesis 19:4. This was a mistake.

The people who had surrounded Lot’s house intended to rape the visitors. Rape is usually considered an evil act of violence regardless of the sexual orientation of the act, or of the perpetrators. The rape of women by men is evil, and the rape of men by men is evil. Just as it would be illogical to condemn heterosexuality because some men rape women, so also it is illogical to condemn homosexuality because some men rape other men.

¹⁴ This observation should also raise a bit of pause concerning the application of norms and standards from one cultural setting to another.

¹⁵ Genesis 17:23 *KJV*.

In short, the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is not homosexuality, but *gang rape* as a manifestation of inhospitality.

The Law

The Torah contains more than six hundred regulations governing everyday life. In it can be found instructions on how to plant one's fields, purify one's body following illness or injury, wear clothing, and prepare food, as well as regulations concerning the observance of holy days, whom one may marry, who may approach the Altar, and the penalties for many various crimes. If it's not addressed in the Law, then it's not an important issue for Hebrew Religious life. Indeed, the *entire* Torah – from dietary regulations to marriage guidelines – is governed by an almost pathological interest in maintaining ritual purity. This observation cannot be undervalued, and must not be overlooked. There is *no such thing* as an Old Testament law which is divorced from the objective of ritual purity.

This hasn't stopped many Christians, however, from trying to divide the law into regulations dealing with ritual matters on the one hand, and those dealing with moral matters on the other. Those dealing with ritual purity are set aside by the death of Jesus on the cross, while those that are thought to deal with morality are still enforced. This understanding is an *invention* of Christian theologians who wish to add human performance in obedience to the Law to the atoning work of Christ. Of course, their use of the Levitical code is selective *even* within the group of laws which are thought to be strictly moral in nature. And few laws are more selectively chosen than those which condemn practices that the interpreters do not like.

To put it succinctly, the Torah is *the* major Biblical source for those who seek a supposedly clear condemnation of homosexuality. Indeed, nearly every argument¹⁶ that one hears these days against homosexuality has, at its root, an attempt to apply the following two Levitical laws to Gays and Lesbians:

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.¹⁷

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.¹⁸

¹⁶ Including *every* argument supposedly based upon the New Testament references.

¹⁷ Leviticus 18:22

¹⁸ Leviticus 20:13

From these two verses it would appear that the law condemns homosexuality in a straightforward and unambiguous way. Ostensibly, they declare that homosexual activity is an abomination and, as such, should not be practiced. Indeed, so heinous is this crime that the Biblical penalty is death. While most Christians, today, would not go so far as to demand the execution of homosexuals,¹⁹ nevertheless most do understand, accept, and apply these passages to support their rejection of homosexuality. In other words, based upon these verses most Churches believe homosexuality to be “incompatible with Christian teaching.”²⁰

As popular as this interpretation is, there are a couple of problems with it. Firstly, it does not consider the context of these passages within the book of Leviticus. While some might question the importance of this failing, the simple truth is that great harm is done to the correct understanding of the Scriptures if the context is ignored. Hence, it is important to determine the setting of each text, the intention of the author, and the original objective of each passage. This is particularly important where the law is concerned. The second problem is that the traditional interpretation of these verses requires an inconsistent application of the Law; certain laws are accepted while others are rejected. We will examine both of these problems in-depth.

Context

What is the context for these two passages? Are they as straightforward as they appear, and thus general and universal in their application, or are they articulated within a setting which directs their application to a specific condition or situation? The context from which Leviticus 18:21 is drawn reads as follows:

You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord. You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. You shall not have sexual relations with any animal and defile yourself with it, nor shall any woman give herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it: it is perversion. Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves.²¹

¹⁹ There are, however a few nutcases who actually urge this penalty.

²⁰ *The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church.*

²¹ Leviticus 18:21-24

At first glance, this looks very bad indeed. The passage appears to be a list of prohibited practices, including child sacrifice, homosexual activity, and bestiality. We would be remiss, however, if we failed to recognize that these prohibitions actually comprise a single unit. It is also important to note that the section of Leviticus from which this passage is taken has, as its primary objective, the maintenance of ritual purity and proper religious observance.

The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, whose religious practices were both ubiquitous and alluring to the children of Abraham. These practices included child sacrifice and sexual acts with male clergy and with animals as ritual offerings to the gods. The purpose of the law, both here and in Leviticus 20, is to differentiate the Israelites from the Canaanites by prohibiting these religious practices. In other words, the true Israelite will not participate in the worship of Molech, neither by sacrificing their children nor by engaging in sexual relations with their clergy or their sacrificial animals. In short, the condemnation of homosexuality in Leviticus is articulated entirely from within the context of prohibited *religious* practice. It is not a general law, universally applied for all time, but rather is particular to the situation then present in Palestine. The Israelites were to avoid the worship of Molech, and the Canaanite religious practices that surrounded such worship were forbidden.

Some may object that this explanation looks a little too convenient and the context a little too confining. How can we be sure that the law, here, is dealing only with religious practice and not with sexual relations in general? If homosexual practices are an abomination here, shouldn't they be considered an abomination in every context? And, for that matter, if this interpretation is correct, then what about bestiality?²² In short, *why* should the context be seen as confining to the application of the law? These are good questions.

Contextual clues are present within the passage itself, as well as elsewhere in Leviticus, which make it reasonably certain that the *direct* reference here is to a specific religious practice. One of these clues is, of course, the mention of the Canaanite god, Molech, in 18:21. Another, highly compelling confirmation of this interpretation can be found, at the linguistic level, in an analysis of the actual word used for declaring homosexual practice an "abomination."

In Hebrew there are two idioms which are frequently used to identify specific abominations: *zimmah* and *toevah*. Throughout the Torah their use is both precise and consistent, leaving little doubt as to the accuracy of their application. With *no* exceptions, whenever immoral sexual acts, such as rape, incest, or secular prostitution are the subject, the word *zimmah*

²² The argument regarding bestiality is a red herring; the subject at hand is homosexual practice, and whether or not it should be considered an "abomination," not bestiality. However, it is true that the proper interpretation of Leviticus 18 would limit the prohibition, here, to just the practice of bestiality within the context of idolatrous worship. It should be noted, however, that while nowhere else in the Old Testament is homosexual practice declared an abomination, bestiality *is* singled out as a *sexual* sin in several other references. See, especially, the "curses" of Deuteronomy 27:21.

is used to denounce them.²³ On the other hand, whenever the Law is addressing questions of idolatry, such as in the worship of Baal, the word *toevah* is used.²⁴ In the case of *both* Leviticus 18 and Leviticus 20, the author used the idiom *toevah*, thus indicating that the “abomination” here is one of a religious, not a sexual, nature.

To put it simply, these prohibitions in Leviticus apply only to those practices that are conducted in the worship of Molech or, by *logical* extension, in any religious context. Those who engage in homosexual activity outside of a pagan religious context should not be considered the objective of this law, and their actions should not be called “abominations.”

This answer will not satisfy everyone. Indeed, when faced with the non-contextual character of the traditional interpretation of the Levitical prohibitions, some will still desire to apply them outside their context based upon the common principle of “guilt by association.” It is reasoned that, since homosexual practices were employed in the worship of Molech, and as such the Torah rejected them, it would be better for us to err on the side of caution and not practice homosexuality in *any* context. While certainly a frequently favored approach, it is not at all a Biblical one because it runs contrary to what the Bible *actually* says. Leviticus prohibits homosexual activity in the context of pagan worship; it says *nothing* about homosexual activity outside of this context. While this doesn’t mean that the Israelites would have considered homosexual activity a “good thing,” we don’t have Biblical support for further judgment.

Attempting to apply the Levitical prohibition against modern-day, non-idolatrous homosexuals, without regard for its context is an example of exceedingly poor exegesis. It is also fraught with great dangers. One of those dangers is the issue of selectivity, or the inconsistent application of the law, which is a serious problem where legalism is concerned.

Selectivity

In addition to explaining their poor Biblical exegesis, those Christians who would seek to apply the Levitical prohibition against homosexual practice without regard to its original context must answer the even more difficult challenge of hypocritical selectivity. To put it simply, upon what ground does one choose to enforce a select group of Biblical laws while, at the same time, rejecting others? This question becomes even more critical when those laws which are selected are found not only in the same section of the Torah, but even in the same paragraph, *and verse*, as those which are ignored. This is often the case.

²³ *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew And English Lexicon.*

²⁴ *ibid*

It should also be remembered that the concept of a “moral law” as somehow being distinct from a “ritual law” is a non-Biblical invention of Christian theologians. In the Hebrew Bible *all* law is based upon the critical importance of maintaining ritual purity. *Anything* which might make one ritually tainted – be it the eating of pork or the murder of one’s neighbor – is to be avoided at all cost. In the case of the Levitical prohibition against homosexual conduct, the principle objective here was to avoid idolatry. Fewer things will make one religiously unclean as fast as being involved in the worship of other gods. Hence, a large segment of the law deals with this very topic – ironic, since the Hebrew people had a persistent habit of wandering into idolatry.

Given that the entire law deals with the issue of maintaining ritual purity, how can we possibly claim that one part applies while another part does not? Put another way, if those laws which deal with homosexual behavior are to be enforced irrespective of their original setting, why shouldn’t the laws which deal with one’s diet, clothing, or marriage be enforced as well?

Many people are under the false impression that the Law is limited to just the Ten Commandments and a few other prohibitions, like those dealing with homosexuality; this is simply not the case. Rather, it is remarkable to note the degree to which the Hebrew Law literally invaded every aspect of one’s life. From diet to clothing to dealings with family and strangers, the law was pervasive – and ignorance of it was not considered an excuse; unless one was familiar with *all* of its intimate details, the law was actually *very* easy to violate. That is a frightening prospect, for as even St. James recognized:

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.²⁵

If certain specific laws are going to be enforced against individuals and “lifestyles” which are not in favor, shouldn’t all of the law be enforced and kept? Upon what ground do those who wish to apply Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 to modern-day homosexuals believe that they can avoid the condemnation of the following Biblical laws?

²⁵ James 2:10-11

- When any man has a discharge from his member, his discharge makes him ceremonially unclean. *Leviticus 15:2b*
- When a woman has a discharge of blood that is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening. *Leviticus 15:19*
- When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien....*Leviticus 19:9-10*
- You shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. *Leviticus 19:13c*
- If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people. *Leviticus 17:10*
- None of you shall approach anyone near of kin to uncover nakedness: I am the Lord. *Leviticus 18:6*
- You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. *Leviticus 19:15*
- You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. *Leviticus 19:17*
- You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; *Leviticus 19:19a*
- You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; *Leviticus 19:19b*
- Nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials. *Leviticus 19:19c*
- You shall not eat anything with its blood. *Leviticus 19:26a*

- You shall not practice augury or witchcraft. *Leviticus 19:26b*
- You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. *Leviticus 19:27*
- You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the Lord. *Leviticus 19:28*
- They shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled; neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband. *Leviticus 21:7*
- No one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. *Leviticus 21:18-20*
- You shall not eat anything that dies of itself... You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk. *Deuteronomy 14:21*
- You shall not see your neighbor's donkey or ox fallen on the road and ignore it; you shall help to lift it up. *Deuteronomy 22:4*
- A woman shall not wear a man's apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment; for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the Lord your God. *Deuteronomy 22:5*
- If you come on a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs, with the mother sitting on the fledglings or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young. *Deuteronomy 22:6*
- When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof; otherwise you might have bloodguilt on your house, if anyone should fall from it. *Deuteronomy 22:8*

- You shall make tassels on the four corners of the cloak with which you cover yourself. *Deuteronomy 22:12*
- Those born of an illicit union shall not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. *Deuteronomy 23:2*
- If one of you becomes unclean because of a nocturnal emission, then he shall go outside the camp; he must not come within the camp. When evening comes, he shall wash himself with water, and when the sun has set, he may come back into the camp. *Deuteronomy 23:10-11*
- You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent. *Deuteronomy 23:19*

A list of Scriptures, such as this, is always an interesting study in contrasts. Some of these laws make sense to us, and we almost instinctively agree with them and believe that all should obey them. Others appear less reasonable, reflecting concepts and ideas which we no longer accept or which are no longer present in our culture. And, finally, some laws seem just outright crazy to us. And, yet, *all* of these are *Biblical* – they are just a few of the many laws, rules, and guidelines by which the Hebrew people both differentiated themselves from the tribes which surrounded them and kept themselves ritually pure for the worship of Yahweh. Few Christians truly abide by even a small portion of the law, much less all of it; hence, if we wish to champion ourselves as being “Biblical Christians,” what right do we have to pick and choose the laws we want to enforce and the laws we want to ignore? Is it anything other than arrogant hypocrisy for us to say: “The law which prohibits you from practicing your homosexual orientation applies to you, but the law prohibiting me from charging interest on loans doesn’t apply to me.”

And, yet, that is precisely what we do when we pick and choose the laws that we want to apply to others, while conveniently ignoring the many laws which condemn our own actions.²⁶ We may *claim* that we are upholding “Biblical standards of morality” when we oppose the civil rights of modern-day homosexuals, but are we *really* upholding a “Biblical standard,” or are we just selectively using the Bible to support our own agenda? Shouldn’t we, rather, adopt the wisdom of James and commit ourselves to obeying the entire law, without exception or selection?

²⁶ Yes ... “we.” If we don’t do it on this issue, we do it on others.

While this would truly be “Biblical,” it seems rather unlikely that it could be called “Christian.” The sad truth is that such positions are, at the same time, both the height of religious legalism and the depth of rank hypocrisy. Forcing others to live by laws which you, yourself, do not keep, is a prescription for the kind of pharisaic corruption which Jesus criticized so vociferously. We must either keep the whole law, depending upon it for our salvation, or take the Christian path of grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The choice is that simple: Law or Grace. We cannot have it both ways.

Chapter Three

The New Testament

It has not been our intention to go on a crusade against the Law, nor is it the premise of this book that the Law is worthless or without a role in the Christian life; the Law is good, just, and contains within it the Will of God for the children of Israel, but it doesn't save. This is both a critical and a frequently misunderstood concept in Christian Theology, but it is one that *must not* be ignored. The Gospel teaches Christians that obedience to the Law is *not* the basis for one's salvation.

Paul's churches in Galatia²⁷ were, for the most part, made up of Gentiles who had never followed the Law of Moses, never been circumcised, never obeyed the dietary regulations or blood purity laws, and never been subject to the High Holy Days of the Jewish faith. Lacking these characteristics of Judaism, the Gentiles were a serious problem because, until then, Christians had thought of themselves as a sect, or denomination, of Judaism. A non-Jewish Christian was as radical a concept then as a non-Christian Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, or Presbyterian would be today. Judaism was the religion while Christianity was the denomination; hence, to be a Christian, one also needed to be a Jew. Although this was the prevailing view, it was not the one which Paul accepted or taught to his Gentile converts. Rather, he believed Christianity to be a new creation, a new beginning, a new way of entering into a covenant relationship with God. While Christianity was certainly related to Judaism, for Paul and the Churches he founded it was understood that Gentiles didn't need to become Jews. This idea was so radically at odds with the accepted norm of Jewish Christianity that it eventually became *the* major source of conflict in the early Church. The Jewish Christian leadership²⁸ sent missionaries to Paul's Churches, informing them that if they were *really* Christians they would also convert to Judaism. Circumcision, obedience to the dietary regulations, observance of holy days and the ritual blood purity laws were all going to have to be imposed upon Gentile Christians. In short, they would have to stop being Gentiles and start being Jews in order to continue to grow in Christ. They would have to obey the precepts of the Torah.

Paul's opposition to this message is articulated most completely in his Epistle to the Galatians, where he writes:

This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?²⁹

Paul's question is simple: does the Christian life begin through faith in Jesus Christ, or through obedience to the Law? Even the Jewish Christians agreed that salvation came to

²⁷ A region of the Roman Empire located in north-central Asia Minor, in the modern-day nation of Turkey.

²⁸ Sometimes known as "the Brethren of James" and "the Circumcision Party."

²⁹ Galatians 3:2-3 *KJV*

the Gentiles through faith, not works. If salvation is through faith, then is it reasonable to believe that one continues in the Christian life through willful obedience to the precepts of the Law? Paul's answer is a resounding "No!" Salvation comes by faith, and one actually continues in the Christian walk by faith and faith alone.

Indeed, attempting to obey the Law as a means of becoming a better Christian is not only mistaken, in Paul's estimation it is a backward step. Invariably, legalism destroys the power of God's grace in a Christian. While startling in the extreme, his statement to this effect cannot be watered down:

You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.³⁰

Faith is not only the means by which one is born again in Christ, it is also the way that one continues in Christ. Obedience to the laws articulated in Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers won't do it; becoming a Jew won't do it. Indeed, applying those rules will do exactly the *opposite* by causing those who attempt it to focus upon their own ability to fulfill the requirements of the law. As long as one is focusing upon the self, and upon one's own ability to perform the works of the Law, it is impossible to see or trust in the grace of Jesus. Or, as Paul put it:

I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness comes by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.³¹

In other words, trying to be saved, or to further one's Christian life, by obeying the Law will only cause one to fall away from grace. While Paul admitted that Good Works are important, he was clear in asserting that they only have a place as the spiritually-inspired outgrowth of a life of faith; they do not produce or further the Christian life, they are the outward signs of that life.³²

³⁰ Galatians 5:3-6

³¹ Galatias 2:21

³² Ephesians 2:10

What, then, is the role of the Law in the Christian life? If one is neither saved by obedience to the law, nor grows in the Christian life through such obedience but through faith in Jesus Christ, then what is its purpose?

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.³³

Paul writes, “the law was our disciplinarian,” or as some other translations have put it, “our schoolmaster.” As such, it teaches us how far we fall short of God’s glory, how much we are in need of God’s grace, and what the life of faith looks like when God’s grace moves through us, transforming our lives. We don’t obey the law to live a Christian life; we live a Christian life by faith:

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”³⁴

The law is good, righteous, and holy, but it doesn’t save. If we are going to attempt to be saved by keeping the law, then there can be no half measures; legalism is an all-or-nothing proposition. Our choice is simple: we can either rely upon the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, which comes to us through faith in him, or we can rely upon our own ability to obey the law, in its every single particular, without fail and without loophole, every day of our lives. Remember that short list of laws from the previous chapter? Each one of those, and the many hundreds more that went unlisted, *must* be kept regardless of cultural setting or individual interpretation. Ignorance is not an excuse, and obedience must be perfect because the law itself demands perfection, without fault or blemish. That is the Biblical standard on the law.

If we’re going to apply the Old Testament Law to homosexuals, asserting that they cannot be Christians or, if they are, that they must cease being homosexuals, then in

³³ Galatians 3:23-26

³⁴ Galatians 3:10-11

all honesty we're going to have to be ready to obey the law ourselves. Anything less is both unbiblical *and* hypocritical.

If, however, we're going to live by the standard of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – the standard of grace – then there can be no place for the Law as a determining factor on who can be a Christian, or how a Christian must behave.³⁵ As Paul wrote:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.³⁶

Do we truly believe this? Do we truly believe that there is “now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus?” If we do, then why does the Church continue to condemn homosexuals even despite their evident lives of faith and the powerful grace of Jesus that can be seen working in and among them? There are many Christians who are alive in Christ, and yet they are still homosexuals. Why does the Church persist in condemning them?

Firstly, the church condemns them because of a strong cultural bias against homosexuality. For the western mind and sensibilities homosexuality has usually been an uncomfortable idea. This was true of western culture during pagan times just as it has been true during the Christian era.³⁷

Secondly, the church condemns homosexual practice because of the traditional understanding of the Old Testament legal code. It is sadly the case that the Church has long been quite legalistic in its approach to the Christian life. The Church, even in its Protestant incarnations, has failed to truly believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While it is true that the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith has received great lip service, nevertheless the pitfalls that befell Paul's gentile churches have, all too often, befallen the church to this day. In effect, we don't *really* believe that God's grace, working in and through our faith, is all that is needed. We want to add human works, human accomplishments, and human obedience to the Law ... or, more accurately, to a modified, watered down, highly edited version of what we think the Law should contain. We don't want to impose the *whole* Law ... just those bits and pieces which appeal to our

³⁵ This does *not* mean that Christians may behave however they want; one's Christian behavior is to be guided by the inner prompting of the Holy Spirit. The key words here are “inner prompting” and “Holy Spirit,” but too often those who would take upon themselves the mantle of “mouthpiece for the Holy Spirit” ignore this subtlety.

³⁶ Romans 8:1-2

³⁷ See, in particular, the writings of Seneca, Plutarch, and Dio Chrysostom.

sensibilities and which tell others how *they* should behave. In other words, while we want Jesus to have the glory, we want some too. And, so, we add to God's grace the requirement that certain laws be obeyed, while conveniently ignoring those laws with which we disagree. Those who obey our caricature of the Law are approved and admitted into fellowship, while those who fail to abide by our standards are consigned to the outer darkness, where there will be much wailing and gnashing of teeth.

And, finally, the church continues to condemn homosexuality out of a belief that the New Testament condemns it. Many Christians who are not prone to turning to the Old Testament Law *will* turn to the New Testament, and to the writings of Paul, to justify their condemnation of Homosexuals. "The Old Testament may not apply," they agree, "but the New Testament does."

Does it? How many Christians pay attention to what Jesus had to say about divorce?³⁸ What about Paul's proclamations on marriage³⁹ or on what women should wear on their heads?⁴⁰ What about the regulations in the Acts of the Apostles' on the eating of meat with blood in it?⁴¹ Even when it comes to the New Testament, most Christians are *highly* selective regarding what they will accept and what they want to ignore.

The New Testament passages which directly address homosexuality are 1 Corinthians 6:9, Romans 1:18-32, and 1 Timothy 1:10. Since the relevant word in 1 Timothy is the same as one of the two used in the 1 Corinthians passage, we will examine both of these together before moving on to the far more important reference in the Epistle to the Romans.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Of the New Testament passages which are believed to directly address homosexuality, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 is both the most quoted and the least understood. A large part of the difficulty stems from the multitude of poor translation choices made regarding the two Greek words: *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. Since the first English translations, these two words have each been rendered in no less than 10 different ways,

³⁸ Matthew 5:32 reads: "Anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

³⁹ 1 Corinthians 7:10-11

⁴⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:5 reads: "...any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head..."

⁴¹ Acts 15:20 reads: "But we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood."

sometimes even being combined together to form a single word or phrase where two distinctly different words were actually intended. As will be seen, in none of these cases are the translations faithful to the original Greek.

A fairly common translation of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 can be found in the *New Revised Standard Version*:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, *male prostitutes*, *sodomites*, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.⁴²

The NRSV renders *malakoi* as “male prostitutes” and *arsenokoitai* as “sodomites;” by comparison, the KJV translates these two key words as “effeminate” and “abusers of themselves with mankind.” In both cases, the translation is horribly wrong.

Malakoi is used in the New Testament in only three places,⁴³ the first two being parallel passages in Matthew and Luke. In Matthew it actually appears twice in one verse, and here the translators of the NRSV have rendered it correctly:

What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.⁴⁴

If you’re saying “but I don’t see anything about *male prostitutes* or *effeminate* people here,” you’re correct. In Matthew, as well as in Luke, the word *malakoi* is correctly rendered as the adjective “soft” – as in “soft robes.”

The soft feel of rich fabrics, comfortable pillows, an infant’s skin, and delicate plants are all among those things that are commonly modified by the application of the Greek word *malakoi*. Linguistically speaking, this is the etymological meaning of the word in its root derivation, not an idiomatic interpretation or opinion. When, throughout Greek literature, it is used in its literal sense, “tactilely soft” is its meaning.⁴⁵

Idiomatically, *malakoi* is used in several ways which are, nevertheless, generally related to the literal sense of the word. It is sometimes used to describe a freshly plowed

⁴² 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 *emphasis added*

⁴³ Matthew 11:8, Luke 7:25, and 1 Corinthians 6:9

⁴⁴ Matthew 11:8

⁴⁵ Henry George Liddell. Robert Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. (Oxford. Clarendon Press, 1940.)

field, or a gentle touch, or a weak, sick, or frightened person. When it is used in a musical context it sometimes conveys connotations of a feminine nature and could, to that extent *only*, be thought of as “effeminate.” One of the most common idiomatic applications of *malakoi* is its use in classical Greek literature to describe a character flaw; in this case it generally means, “weak willed” or “easily beguiled” and, as such, constitutes a negative judgment. In other words, it most frequently describes an inability to uphold a sense of moral integrity combined with a general weakness of conviction.

Most of the linguistic scholars who have focused on this verse have concluded that this particular idiomatic meaning was the one most likely intended by Paul. It was a common idiom in the Koine Greek of his time, would not have been out of character for Paul to use in this way, and actually fits quite well into the general context of this portion of 1 Corinthians. As for how *malakoi* should best be translated into English, perhaps “weak willed,” “wishy-washy,” “namby-pamby,” “lukewarm,” “ethically flabby,” or “morally insipid” would suffice. It certainly does *not* mean “male prostitute,” and while “effeminate” might apply if the subject at hand were the quality of a musical piece, such is not the case here.

Arsenokoitai is used only twice in the New Testament,⁴⁶ and also has the questionable distinction of being one of the few words which is found *nowhere* else in existing Greek literature.⁴⁷ Its literal meaning is at best questionable, with its etymological roots being “man-active-bed” or, perhaps, “lying-with-men.” Since we have no other instances of its use anywhere in Greek literature, the question of its meaning beyond the bare bones of its etymology is wide-open for debate. For example, if *arsenokoitai* refers to homosexuals then why did Paul use such an obscure – indeed, otherwise unknown and possibly self-coined – term when Greek is literally *filled* with words which are commonly used to describe various homosexual relationships? Instead of using a well-known word, Paul used a word that was unknown in Greek literature in his day. Several other arguments exist as well, including why, if homosexuality was intended, did Paul not use the term *arsenokoitai*, or “man-passive-bed,” indicating a male who takes the inactive role sexually.

As for what *arsenokoitai* actually means in this context, there are several superior alternatives to the traditional translation of “homosexual” or “sodomite.” It may mean a

⁴⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10.

⁴⁷ According to the Liddell-Scott *Greek-English Lexicon* this word occurs only 2 times out of the 3,828,231 words in all of Greek literature. An example of a word derived from *arsenokoitai* has been identified in the second book of the *Sibylline Oracles*, but this work is a Jewish-Christian production which has been dated later than 1 Corinthians and, indeed, may well be dependent upon it. Otherwise, no known instances of its use have been discovered.

male prostitute who takes the active role sexually, in which case Paul's intention would be better translated: "hustler" or "gigolo." A further possible meaning for this word may be understood from within the context of Greek culture: pederasty. While repugnant to the twenty-first century western mind, during the first century it was not considered unusual for an older, respected and established man to take a teen-age boy as his sexual companion.⁴⁸ *Arsenokoitai* might well be understood as a reference to the older male pederast in such relationships, though this is by no means certain from the context of the Biblical passage. Yet another interesting translation might be "rapist." A rapist definitely takes the active role in a sex act, and as such would better match the etymological meaning of the word.

In short, while *arsenokoitai* might reference homosexual activity, it is by no means *certain* that it does. Etymologically, it seems to reference a male who is sexually active in bed, which could reasonably reference a rapist, a pederast, or a male-prostitute. In any case, it seems unreasonable to interpret the reference to *arsenokoitai* as a condemnation of all modern-day adult homosexuals, and especially not those who are committed to monogamous, life-long relationships. The word may well be accepted as addressing homosexual prostitution, homosexual pederasty, or rape (homosexual or otherwise), however any of these definitions would fail to address the experience of modern, adult, consensual, monogamous homosexual relationships.

As for an accurate translation of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, the following may suffice:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?
Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, morally weak,
gigolos, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these
will inherit the kingdom of God.

One may replace "gigolos" with "rapists" or "pederasts" and the essence of the translation would be the same: a general condemnation of homosexuals *cannot* be supported here.

The realization that this passage probably lacks a direct reference to homosexuality has caused some to turn elsewhere for arguments against Gays and Lesbians. For example, many Christians will argue that, since all sex outside of marriage is prohibited, the practice of homosexuality must also be prohibited. The problem with

⁴⁸ While not unusual, it was nevertheless a practice which was ridiculed by many pagan philosophers and Jewish writers of the time.

this argument is that Gays and Lesbians are currently barred from access to the marriage rites by most Christian denominations. Denying them the formal rites of marriage – rites which would legitimize their sexual relationships – and then condemning them for having sex outside of marriage is, in the very least, disingenuous. The charge also fails to recognize that many Gay and Lesbian Christians have committed themselves together in long-term relationships which have all of the psychological characteristics of marriage. While usually not recognized by our society or by the institutional church, their personal covenants are nevertheless deeply fulfilling and, at least in their own experience and belief, are blessed by God. In other words, those homosexual Christians who are in committed relationships do not perceive themselves as being guilty of the traditional charge of fornication. In their own eyes, they *are* married.⁴⁹

Romans 1:26-28

Even though it is unlikely that 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 contains a negative assessment of homosexual activity, the fact remains that such a reference *can* be found at Romans 1:26-28. While it is true that a few of the key words have been distorted by certain translations, for the most part the passage is faithfully rendered in the majority of English versions. In other words, the translation problems that have so plagued the 1 Corinthians reading are not present in the Romans passage.

So, what does Paul say? Are his words a clear indictment of homosexuality, as is commonly thought by most Christians? It must be admitted that, at first glance, the Apostle's remarks look rather bad for homosexuals:

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

⁴⁹ The issue of Homosexual Unions is not the direct focus of this book, though it is understood that the conclusions drawn here will have an impact upon one's thinking on the subject. For some excellent resources on the Gay Marriage debate, see the "Suggested Readings" and "Bibliography." For the author's opinion on the subject, please see the "Afterward."

they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.⁵⁰

What is Paul's point in this passage? Is his topic specifically the evils of homosexuality, and God's condemnation of it, or are his words part of a broader context? What does he mean when he writes, "God gave them up" to homosexuality, why did God do this, and is Paul really referring to homosexuals as we know them today? Surprisingly enough, upon a closer inspection of the chapter it becomes evident that Paul's argument actually has very little to do with modern homosexuality. Rather, the Apostle views same-sex desire as being the *direct* result of God's punishment for idolatry.

Paul makes it clear, through a lengthy discourse on idolatry and its consequences, that the Gentiles have no excuse for not believing in the Lordship of God. He does this by asserting that the world itself is a testimony to God's sovereignty, and that everything one needs to know regarding God being the Lord of creation is evident to those who are willing to see it.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.⁵¹

Although they've not had access to the Torah, Gentiles can still know about God through observing the wonders of creation. Unfortunately, far from recognizing the Divine fingerprint in the structure and glory of the universe, pagans have actually taken to worshipping the creation rather than the Creator. Even despite the glories of God's grace, clearly present in natural revelation, Gentiles have gone astray into idolatry.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.⁵²

⁵⁰ Romans 1:26-28

⁵¹ Romans 1:19-20

⁵² Romans 1:22-23

Because of the sin of idolatry God gives these Gentiles over to the full measure of their depravity and they suffer the inherent penalty for their sin. Essentially, Paul asserts that their wickedness actually generates its own coordinated punishment.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.⁵³

Since pagans have exchanged the worship of the Creator with the worship of the creation, God has given them over to the consequences of their idolatry and has caused them to exchange their “natural” desires for “unnatural” ones. In this argument the Apostle is heavily influenced by the long-standing connection made in Judaism between idolatry and homosexual practice.⁵⁴ As was seen in chapter two, the Hebrews knew about and condemned such behaviors as they existed within the context of pagan worship.⁵⁵ Paul, being well aware of this connection, accordingly considered homosexuality to be the result of – and, indeed, *God’s punishment for* – idolatry. Given the theological and cultural presuppositions of the Jewish people, it was a logical conclusion for Paul to draw. What we must do, however, is consider whether or not we are bound to accept the Apostle’s conclusions on this matter. And, in order to determine this, his reasoning must be examined.

Paul’s condemnation was based upon his culturally conditioned understanding of homosexuality as having a *direct* and *historic* connection with paganism and with a denial of the Lordship of Yahweh. Since this connection is the driving force in the Apostle’s reasoning, any consideration of his argument or adoption of his conclusion must not ignore it. Exegetically, it would be wrong for us to adopt his conclusions regarding homosexuality without also following and accepting the course of his reasoning. And, yet, his reasoning is rooted in a culturally conditioned experience which, for the most part, we neither share nor accept as being valid: i.e., that homosexuality is *caused* by idolatry. In the very least we should recognize that Paul’s presupposition is

⁵³ Romans 1:24-25

⁵⁴ Indeed, examples of this influence can be found in the writings of many Jewish authors from this period, including Philo of Alexandria and in the *Wisdom of Solomon*. Even some of the gentile authors of the first century shared Paul’s negative assessment, though they usually differed on the cause.

⁵⁵ Remember, the two Leviticus passages are set within the context of religious prohibitions; they are not general laws against sexual practices, but specific prohibitions of pagan religious rituals.

neither original with him nor particular to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Being a culturally conditioned argument with strong ties to a specific time, place, and circumstance, it could be argued that his premise and subsequent conclusion have roughly the same degree of authority for us today as Paul's pronouncements requiring women to cover their heads while praying or prophesying.⁵⁶

Does this mean that we are free to disregard the Apostle's argument and conclusion, just as most Protestants today are quick to disregard as "culturally-bound" and "irrelevant" Paul's opinion regarding women and head-coverings? While many will reject such an idea out of hand, others are quick to leap to it as a simple solution to a rather thorny problem. Neither conclusion, however, gives sufficient weight to the *entirety* of Paul's argument, nor does either take seriously the task of sound Scriptural interpretation. In the very least, further examination of his argument is warranted. After all, idolatry – of several sorts – is still a very serious issue for the church today. Since this was the actual focus of Paul's argument, how are we to understand his conclusion in *this* light? This question is particularly crucial given our modern-day understanding and experience of homosexuality as a sexual orientation rather than as just a pagan religious practice.⁵⁷ While Paul's conclusion might be thought of as valid for Christians who have slipped into idolatry, as well as for non-Christians involved in pagan worship, the question does remain as to its general applicability to *all* homosexuals, and to *Christian* homosexuals in particular. To put it simply, is all homosexuality the result of idolatry?

Let us not forget that Paul is addressing the problem of Gentile pagans who have denied the Lordship of God even despite the clear fingerprint of intelligent design which is visible in the universe. These people have been given over by God to moral depravity in their daily living and to ritual homosexuality in the course of their idol worship. The Apostle has no personal or cultural concept of any other kind of homosexual, and what concept he does have is entirely the result of a traditional Hebraic world-view. With this in mind, let's consider our question relative to what Paul says about the pitfalls of idolatry in general, and the distinct characteristics of idolaters in particular.

⁵⁶ Which is also a culturally conditioned position. See 1 Corinthians 11:5

⁵⁷ An understanding and experience which, as has already been pointed out, differs greatly from Paul's understanding and experience.

- They reject the knowledge of God.⁵⁸
- They do not glorify God or acknowledge God’s Grace, and their hearts and minds have become “darkened.”⁵⁹
- They exchange God’s glory for idolatry.⁶⁰
- They engage in degrading promiscuous sex.⁶¹
- They believe lies and serve the creation and not the Creator.⁶²
- They exchange their own “natural” sexuality for an “unnatural” one.⁶³
- Their minds are depraved and they promote immorality.⁶⁴

These characteristics are blatant and specific and, while there are many homosexuals who certainly fit this picture, the same may also be said for many heterosexuals. In the very least it must be admitted that this list doesn’t even come close to describing those Gays and Lesbians who, by God’s grace, live a life of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

The problem here is that many Christians cannot see the difference between the experience of homosexuality with which Paul was familiar and the committed, long-term, and loving relationships of many homosexuals today. Indeed, the argument is sometimes made that homosexuality is just a modern version of idolatry whereby the self and the flesh are worshipped over and above the Creator. While this might be the case for some Gays and Lesbians, it is by no means *necessarily* true for all; idolatry is far more pernicious and prevalent. We may try to fool ourselves into believing otherwise, but the truth is that any *thing*, any *person*, any *concept* or *desire* that takes the place of the Lordship of Jesus Christ becomes our idol. In the twenty-first century we worship at many temples: god-self, god-dollar, god-family, god-country, god-Earth, even-god church – all of these, and more, compete for our time and allegiance. And, while it is

⁵⁸ Romans 1:20

⁵⁹ Romans 1:21

⁶⁰ Romans 1:22-23

⁶¹ Romans 1:24

⁶² Romans 1:25

⁶³ Romans 1:26-27

⁶⁴ Romans 1:28-32

certainly true that sex can become an enticing god, this kind of modern idolatry is not just peculiar to homosexuals; heterosexuals can be just as prone to placing the self and the joys of sex above faith in God. To confirm this, take a cursory look at the internet or at television where the pleasures of the flesh are an equal-opportunity tempter. If all Gays and Lesbians are going to be *categorically* identified and condemned as idolaters just because of the promiscuity of some, logical consistency *demand*s that all heterosexuals also be *categorically* identified and condemned as idolaters. Since this conclusion is demonstrably erroneous, the root premise upon which it is based *must also* be erroneous: all homosexuality is *not* the result of idolatry. This is certainly true of those homosexuals who are committed to monogamy, and it is *especially* true of Gay and Lesbian *Christians*.

As we have seen, the very concept of a Christian homosexual was an axiomatic impossibility for Paul; his understanding of its cause entirely ruled that out. And, yet, the Apostle's concept notwithstanding, we know that most homosexuals are not Gay because of God's punishment for idolatry. Rather, much of the current research tends to indicate that there is a prenatal origin for homosexuality. Be it hormonal, genetic, or a combination of both, the cause of same-sex attraction appears to be one which precludes an individual's choice or upbringing. In other words, the probability is that homosexuals are *born* Gay.⁶⁵ This means that, while Paul is certainly correct when he asserts that idolatry has serious consequences, it was his cultural setting – more than anything else – which caused him to specifically identify homosexuality as a manifestation of God's punishment.

Which brings us to the question of homosexuality as a “natural” or “unnatural” orientation. One of the arguments drawn from the first chapter of Romans is that homosexual orientation is unnatural. As the argument usually runs, it is judged to be unnatural because it violates the created, biological norm for human beings. While such is certainly true regarding reproduction, almost all Christians today recognize that human sexuality in general, and much sexual activity in particular, has far more to do with an expression of love and affection than it does with the desire to generate offspring. In other words, humans usually have sex without even intending to procreate; this is true of

⁶⁵ While this book is about the Bible, not Science, the following scientific journal articles will be of some help: J. Michael Bailey and Richard Pillard, “A Genetic Study of Male Sexual Orientation,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 48 (December 1991): 1089-96. Dean H. Hamer and Angela Pattatucci et. al. “Linkage Between Sexual Orientation and Chromosome Xq28 in Males But Not in Females,” *Nature Genetics* 11 (November 1995). Heino Meyer-Bahlburg, “Psychoendocrine Research on Sexual Orientation; Current Status and Future Options,” *Progress in Brain Research* 61 (1984):375-98. See also the Bibliography for these and other references.

those who are physically capable of reproducing as well as of those for whom the ability is either gone or, for whatever reason, was never there to begin with. Put this way, the question of “natural” and “unnatural” gains a new perspective. Is it natural for heterosexuals to engage in sex without the intention or capability of “making a baby?” If it is, then why is it unnatural for homosexuals to engage in sexual relations? Put another way, if it is natural for a 75-year-old heterosexual couple to make love even despite the biological impossibility of their procreating, why is it still considered unnatural for homosexuals?⁶⁶

One of our critical differences with the first-century mind’s perspective on this topic is found in the concept of sexual orientation: the idea was foreign to them.⁶⁷ Their assumption was that everyone was heterosexual and, therefore, any other sexual desire or act was a chosen form of deviant behavior. The very idea that a person could be both emotionally and physically attracted to someone of the same gender was either unknown or, if suspected, was considered to be an individual aberration of extreme proportions. This attitude can be seen reflected in both Gentile and Hebrew writings from this period; it was also Paul’s understanding. Homosexual desire and behavior were individual aberrations, chosen as a result of God’s punishment for idolatry.

While Greek culture understood the concept of a universal norm, it also understood and had the ability to articulate the concept of an individual norm or characteristic. In other words, that which was *universally* “natural” could be distinguished from that which was *individually* “natural.” While there is, admittedly, a great deal of debate on this issue, an excellent case can be made for Paul’s reference in Romans 1 as pertaining to the latter distinction. The Greek word he used was *phusikos*, which etymologically is related to the same root from which we draw our word “physical,” and means “of or pertaining to the body or to one’s physical nature.” Its usage was frequently directed toward *individual* characteristics, such as one’s height, eye or skin color, nationality, or voice, and only less-frequently to characteristics which might be thought of as being universally true. In other words, the word Paul used points to that which is intrinsic to the person – to that which is born or inherent to an *individual* – not to that which is natural for all humans.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ The frequently cited argument based upon the biological mechanics of sexual intercourse are, at best, crude and, at worst, disingenuous. There is more to sex than plumbing and biological mechanics.

⁶⁷ Indeed, even despite the overwhelming psychological evidence to the contrary, some Christians still want to assert that there is no such thing as a “homosexual orientation.”

⁶⁸ Henry George Liddell. Robert Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. (Oxford. Clarendon Press, 1940.). It must be repeated that, while this is an area of significant disagreement among Greek scholars, the focus of the word *phusikos* upon the

What Paul is saying is that heterosexuals who were involved in pagan worship were giving themselves over to sexual relations that were not natural to *them*. Heterosexuals should engage in heterosexual acts, not homosexual ones. By extension, and based upon the logic of Paul's argument, one might say that it would be *equally unnatural* for homosexuals to engage in heterosexual acts. As we have already noted, such an observation would have been quite foreign to Paul, but it does make perfect sense to us given what we now know to be true about sexual orientation.⁶⁹

In short, Paul's remarks have absolutely nothing to do with modern day homosexual Christians. While these verses may address homosexual practices committed by heterosexuals within the context of pagan worship, they do *not* touch upon the orientation and behavior of homosexual Christians who are celibate in their singleness, seeking a life-partner, or faithful to their partners in committed, monogamous relationships. If nothing else, Paul's premise regarding the origin of homosexual desire as being a result of the judgment of God upon idolatry highlights the fact that his remarks do not apply to those who are homosexual by virtue of their birth.

Without the Romans passage, and keeping in mind the inaccurate translation of the 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy passages, the truth of the New Testament's silence on the subject of modern-day homosexuality is stunning. This silence, when combined with what we discovered concerning the Old Testament's two references, leaves us asking one final question: "If the Bible is silent on Homosexuality, what should the Christian say?"

discrete, physical individual lends significant weight to the argument that this word best applies to individual, and not universal, characteristics.

⁶⁹ i.e., that it is real.

Chapter Four

The Answer

“What does the Bible say about homosexuality?”
“Is it possible to be homosexual and a Christian?”
“What did Jesus have to say about homosexuality?”
“Isn’t homosexuality a sin?”

Answers to these questions have not been easy to pose, nor are they easy to accept. The traditional responses, which one might have expected, are not the ones which have been proposed. It is never easy to be confronted with the realization that long-held theological opinions may be in error, nor is it comfortable to face the possibility that traditional Biblical interpretations have come up short. The difficult truth, however, is that the scriptural investigations in this book have shed significant doubt upon not only the traditional interpretation of the Bible with regard to these questions, but also upon the question of what the Christian response should be.

“What does the Bible say about homosexuality?”

After a careful examination of each of the relevant passages the answer is: “very little, if anything.” This is certainly not the expected answer, and yet it is the one that deals most fairly with the linguistic and contextual evidence. In the Old Testament the references were to pagan religious activity – instances of homosexual practice by heterosexuals engaged in the worship of pagan Gods. Since these prohibitions deal, primarily with the abomination of idolatry, and since modern-day homosexuals are not generally engaged in such pagan worship, the application of the Old Testament legal code is not contextually warranted. This interpretation is clarified further when the nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and particularly of Salvation by Grace through Faith, is brought into focus. Are we going to be a legalistic Church, and seat our salvation in obedience to the Law, or are we going to depend upon the Blood of Jesus? If the former, then the Church is faced with *far* more than just the quandary of how to deal with homosexuals; if the latter, then the law’s stance is totally beside the point of our Christian profession.

As for the three New Testament prohibitions, the first two were found lacking in clear relevance to the subject, and the third proved to be the product of Paul’s cultural presuppositions regarding the supposed cause of Homosexuality and not, in any way, particular to the Gospel. In the very least, it must be admitted that the New Testament references are not only open for debate but, indeed, provide *very little* ground for saying anything at all about Homosexuality.

“Is it possible to be homosexual and a Christian?”

If salvation comes by Grace through Faith in Jesus Christ, and not by the works of the Law, then the short answer here must be an uncompromising: “yes.”⁷⁰ Some may respond by saying that “if homosexuals are *real* Christians they’ll stop being gay,” however such objections fail to deal with the consequences of our scriptural study. In response to this classic objection, the simple reply might be: “why should they?” If the scriptures are, essentially, silent regarding modern-day homosexuality, why should homosexual Christians have to deny their orientation? If salvation is by Grace through Faith, and if one continues in their Christian life the same way they began it, then why should obedience to a highly selective list of Laws be required for one to either be, or continue as, a Christian?

“What did Jesus have to say about homosexuality?”

For many Christians the response here is not very satisfying, and yet it is both significantly and *unquestionably* true: Jesus said absolutely *nothing* about homosexuality. Jesus taught on many subjects of deep moral, political, and theological importance, and yet modern-day Christians conveniently ignore most of these teachings while focusing upon subjects and topics about which Jesus was silent. Upon what basis do we do this? By what authority do we ignore Jesus’ teachings on many topics, only to lift up issues which Christ himself ignored? This very issue is one of those topics, and yet we see it tearing the Church apart while the “Great Commission” – to make Disciples of Jesus Christ – goes largely unanswered.

In short, our Lord said more about ministering to the hungry, the naked, the sick and the poor than he did about human sexuality. How can we, his Church, care more about sexual matters than we do about reaching out to the last, the least, and the lost with the Gospel?

“Isn’t homosexuality a sin?”

This question is the *principal* one which Christians should be asking themselves. While scripture is practically silent on the sinfulness of homosexuality, and while Jesus said nothing about the subject, there *still* remains the question of whether or not we’re going to consider it a sin. And, as a direct consequence of the silence of Scripture, those who conclude that it *is* a sin will need to present a well-reasoned justification for their position.

Given the cultural expectations of western society, the Church may prefer to depend upon its own historical and moral traditions as its justification for condemning homosexuality. This would not be anything new; the Church has frequently taken its cue from the culture on

⁷⁰ Galatians 2:21. Also, see Chapter Three, above, pp. 29-35

moral matters. If this is going to be the Church's response, however, it is *critical* that this position *not* be espoused as a "Biblical" one. Homosexuality can be understood as uncomfortable and unappealing to many heterosexuals without resorting to the false robes of "Biblical morality." While denying such vestments will seat the authority for this moral stance in the experience of the individual and the tradition of the Church – and, consequently, *not* in the Bible – it is, in the final equation, the most reasonable position that such Christians can hold. Unfortunately, it also has the drawback of being open to direct critical scrutiny precisely on these grounds. So long as the Bible could be cited as justification for identifying homosexuality as sinful, those who argued contrary had a very high standard to scale; once the Bible's silence is recognized, the ethical standards are essentially equalized. Indeed, as some have proposed, invalidating the Biblical foundation for excluding Gays and Lesbians actually has the effect of inverting the ethical standards, requiring those who would propose such exclusion to justify their position. Just as sexism, racism, and other forms of non-biblical ethnic and cultural bigotry have come to be understood as antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, so also it has been argued that, without Biblical warrants, we really cannot continue to identify homosexuality as *inherently* sinful.

These answers have been supported at length throughout the pages of this book with sound scriptural exegesis. While they will not please everyone, it is the author's prayer that careful and generous consideration will be given to the concepts and conclusions which have been presented. Despite disagreements in Biblical interpretation and theological opinion, as members of the Family of Faith we should be willing to approach these questions with the charity and humility that can only be inspired by the Real Presence of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Afterward

I wrote this book in order to present a sound interpretation of the scriptural passages which have been thought to deal with homosexuality. In the course of my research and writing I have applied the historical-critical tools of contextual and linguistic analysis, tools which are well-known and frequently employed among most Biblical scholars today. As such, I believe that the scriptural interpretations presented in this book are valid regardless of religious or denominational background. In addition to this critical Biblical interpretation, I have also applied a theological interpretation which is consistent with Pauline, Protestant, Anglo-catholic, and Wesleyan-Arminian perspectives. As such, I believe that most Christians will have very little difficulty accepting my assertions regarding the nature of salvation: i.e., that it is a gift of God's grace which is applied to us through faith in Jesus Christ. While many who share this doctrine will not appreciate its full implications relative to the question of homosexuality, those implications – as I have articulated them herein – should not be ignored.

In short, if the scriptural and theological interpretations presented in this book give my readers a moment of pause, then it is my sincere prayer that they will be open to what the Holy Spirit may be saying. In all honesty, there were many moments of pause for me as I researched and wrote this little book. There were times when I didn't like the direction my research was taking me. There were other times when I simply had to put my research aside out of fear and frustration, realizing that many in my own denomination – including many among my friends – would not appreciate my conclusions. In other words, knowing the enemies that I would make, did I *really* want to write this book? It's not a question that is foreign to me ... in the past I have taken stands which have made me less than popular in several Christian circles. This time, however, the issue at hand has been so disastrously polarizing to the church that my taking this stand essentially ensures that I'll become the target for significant personal attack.

Realizing all the many questions that will arise from members of my own faith-community, perhaps it would be best for me to reflect upon what this book's conclusions have to say to the United Methodist Church. Of principle focus here is the question of what I, as an ordained United Methodist minister, will do in response to the findings of this book.

The official position of the United Methodist Church on the subject of Homosexuality can be found in the Social Principles of its *Book of Discipline*. Most importantly, it should be realized that the UMC affirms the equal rights of *all* people “regardless of Sexual Orientation.”

Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to supporting those rights and liberties for homosexual persons. We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting their rightful claims where they have shared material resources, pensions, guardian relationships, mutual powers of attorney, and other such lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships that involve shared contributions, responsibilities, and liabilities, and equal protection before the law. Moreover, we support efforts to stop violence and other forms of coercion against gays and lesbians. We also commit ourselves to social witness against the coercion and marginalization of former homosexuals.⁷¹

⁷¹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church--2000*, ¶162H.

This statement is, for the most part, an excellent one. Among other things, the Church affirms that it supports the civil rights of homosexual *couples*; as a denomination, we assert that they have rightful claims “where they have shared material resources, pensions, guardian relationships, mutual powers of attorney, and other such lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships...” This is an amazing statement, for in it the United Methodist Church effectively announces its support for the civil rights of not only individual homosexuals, but also of Gay and Lesbian *couples*. In other words, the UMC asserts that the claims of homosexuals to the legal rights provided in civil marriages are valid and should be protected.

Unfortunately, while the church is willing to affirm that single homosexuals, as well as Gay and Lesbian couples, have equal rights with heterosexuals and traditional married couples in the secular world, it still refuses to recognize these rights within the church:

Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God’s grace is available to all. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn their lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.⁷²

In the above statement we find an example of the rhetorical gymnastics the General Conference has resorted to in an effort to affirm homosexuals as people of “sacred worth” while, at the same time, condemning their identity *as* homosexuals. In effect, while we mustn’t condemn gays and lesbians we also mustn’t condone any expression or recognition of their sexual orientation ... including, of course, their immediate same-gender partners or boy/girl friends. Some have argued that we should separate our care for the individual homosexual from their sexual orientation, but this belief is *wholly* unrealistic; such is neither possible nor even ever suggested when caring for heterosexuals, so why should we attempt to do so for homosexuals? In truth, it is *impossible* to separate one’s sexual orientation from one’s “sacred worth” because, as we all instinctively know, one’s personal relationships – those for whom one cares and the families in which they live – are all an integral and inseparable part of that worth. If this concept seems difficult, consider how much of your own spiritual “sacred worth” is wrapped up in your personal and familial relationships. If this is true for heterosexuals, why do we pretend that such isn’t true for homosexuals?

⁷² *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church--2000*, ¶161G

In addition to the above problem with the church's position, we are also left wondering *which* Christian teachings are thought to be incompatible with homosexuality. Granted, those who crafted the statement believed that homosexual practice was incompatible with specific *scriptural* teachings, but this book has effectively demonstrated that such simply isn't the case: relative to our twenty-first century context, the Bible is silent. Consequently, the only way homosexual practice can be maintained as "incompatible with Christian teaching" is through an appeal to the moral traditions of the Church. Sadly, if the history of racism and sexism has taught us anything, it's taught us that building our identification of "sin" upon our traditions – and, hence, upon culturally established factors – is problematic to say the least.

If it is argued that homosexual practice is incompatible due to the traditional prohibitions against sex outside of marriage, then the church itself is at fault because it denies marriage rites to homosexual couples.

Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.⁷³

While affirming the secular civil rights of homosexual couples, the church denies them access to the very religious ceremony which would effectively remove one of those oft-perceived "incompatibilities." This is not only contradictory to the *Discipline's* affirmation of the secular civil rights of homosexual couples it is, as we have already seen, hypocritical in the extreme. Nevertheless, it is the official position of the United Methodist Church and all United Methodist clergy are bound by their ordination vows to obey it.

Which brings me to my personal quandary as a United Methodist minister. I, like many UM clergy, have come to disagree with my own church's position on homosexuality. In particular, the *Discipline* requires me to deny the pastoral rites of marriage to homosexuals in my congregation. However, despite my objections, when I was ordained an Elder in the UMC I committed myself to obedience and I shall *not* violate that commitment. Despite my disagreement with our position, and despite the pain that it causes those who have sought such pastoral rites, I have and shall continue to abide by the *Discipline*.

Some of my colleagues in ministry believe that the pastoral needs of their congregations have compelled them to violate the *Discipline* and perform Holy Unions for Gay and Lesbian couples. While I certainly understand, and have shared, the tragic disappointment of having to tell faithful, loyal, attending, serving, *and* tithing members of the church that I am not allowed to bless their Union, I do not believe that the pastoral need provides just cause for breaking the

⁷³ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church--2000*, ¶332, "Ministry of the Ordained."

Discipline. Rather, if one disagrees with Church law, the proper recourse is to petition for corrective legislation through the General Conference; in my opinion, no minister is free to disobey the *Discipline* simply because they disagree with it. Indeed, I believe those who have been violating church law are causing far more harm to their objective – and to those for whom they seek to care – than obedience would cause. If the *Discipline* were to require me to *actively* violate my own principles – to do or say something with which I profoundly disagree or which I believed to be unjust or a violation of the Gospel – that would be a different matter. In such a case, I would probably have to leave the Church rather than violate my vows. However, this prohibition simply requires UM clergy to refrain from action, and while it is painful I can and shall continue to do so with good conscious.

It is my prayer that other clergy, who feel and think as I do, would be more willing to work within the system in order to effect a positive change. One of the most important ways we can do this is through teaching our congregations what the Bible actually has to say on the subject of homosexuality. As pastors of the church, that is our calling. It is certainly mine.

Indeed, it is why I wrote this book.

Suggestions for Further Reading

The following books represent just some of the current popular thinking on both sides of the debate over homosexuality. While I obviously do not agree with everything contained in these books, they may be useful for the average Christian interested in studying these issues in greater depth. For a list of academic and scholarly resources, and particularly those used in the writing of this book, please see the Bibliography.

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About the Author

The Reverend Dr. Gregory S. Neal is a native Texan, born and raised in Dallas, and is proud to be one of the few remaining 5th generation Texans currently in captivity. He is a graduate of Southern Methodist University, Duke University, and Trinity Graduate College, where his studies included extensive work in Bible, Languages, Systematic Theology, Worship, and the Sacraments. An ordained minister of the United Methodist Church, he has served as the pastor of churches in North Carolina and North Texas. As a popular teacher, preacher, and retreat leader, Neal is known for his ability to translate complex theological concepts into common, everyday terms. He is the author of *Grace Upon Grace: Sacramental Theology and the Christian Life* and *Seeking the Shepherd's Arms: Reflections from the Pastoral Side of Life*, both of which are available on the internet at Amazon.com. Reverend Neal is also the rector of *Grace Incarnate Ministry* on the Internet at www.RevNeal.org, where his audio and video sermons may be found.

