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# What Does Scripture Say About Homosexuality?: Ethical Questions for Christian Communities

*Emily Toler*

Christians attempting to live ethical lives in contemporary America have recently confronted many new questions. Is it ethical to use human embryos for stem cell research? Is it ethical to prohibit sex offenders from entering a church? Is it ethical to be wealthy when others are poor? The list of emerging issues is long and diverse, but few questions have sparked so much interest as the debate about homosexuality. The question of whether homosexuality is compatible with a Christian ethic—and the subsequent debate about whether and how to include homosexuals in Christian communities—has emerged as one of the most polarizing issues facing Christians in America, dividing families, congregations, and even entire denominations. Because it is such an important question, Christian ethicists have struggled to help individuals and churches decide what might be an ethical Christian response to homosexuality and homosexuals.

To support their claims, many ethicists turn to Scripture. But different passages from the Bible have been used to support these judgments about homosexuality, and even when the same passage is cited, many different interpretations arise. These problems should compel Christians, who must use these arguments to make ethical decisions in their own lives, to question the validity of these diverse interpretations. By asking questions about historical context, applying (and sometimes translating) Biblical injunctions to modern society, and identifying the possible biases and agendas of the Biblical authors, Christians can derive an ethical judgment about homosexuality from Scripture.

Before investigating these questions, however, an important distinction must be made. It is crucial to recognize that modern understandings of homosexuality differ greatly from those of the Biblical authors. When we speak about *homosexuality* or *homosexuals* today, we understand such terms to refer to an orientation—a physiological and/or psychological condition that exists independently from personal choice. Because this concept is a relatively new development, however, no Biblical author would have been familiar with it. It is imperative to remember this

distinction when reading Scripture for at least two reasons: first, when texts condemn “homosexuality,” they are likely referring to same-sex activities performed by heterosexual individuals; and second, that the texts’ authors simply did not understand that same-sex activities might be motivated by anything other than personal choice. Remembering this distinction between homosexual *orientation* and homosexual *activity* is critical when investigating the question of homosexuality and the Bible.

One of the passages frequently cited in the debate about homosexuality and scripture is the story of two angels who visit Lot in the city of Sodom.<sup>1</sup> In response to Abraham’s plea to spare the city if righteous men still exist there, God sends two messengers to Lot’s home. Lot welcomes them, but the other men of Sodom besiege his residence and demand to be allowed to have relations with the male visitors. Lot refuses, offering his virgin daughters instead, but the Sodomites do not accept the trade and attempt to break into the house. The angels, however, pull Lot back inside, and they blind the other men.

Ostensibly, this story seems to be a straightforward condemnation of homosexuality: the Sodomites men demand to “know” the male visitors, and as a result, they are punished. Modern interpretations of this passage, however, suggest that it must be considered in its textual and historical context, and that its true meaning must be derived from more than a simple reading of the events it describes. Choon-Leong Seow contends that, despite the homoerotic overtones that exist in the passage, homosexuality is not the primary focus of the text. The passage, he writes, “is not about homosexuality in general. It is certainly not about homosexual love. Rather, it is about rape, specifically same-sex rape. It is about gang rape. It is about violence. It is about the violation of a code of hospitality. It is about wickedness in general.”<sup>2</sup>

To make this claim, Seow emphasizes the importance of reading the text in context. He acknowledges that Lot’s actions—offering his daughters instead of his guests to the mob—may seem horrific, but that we are repulsed primarily because we live in a completely different sociocultural milieu. In the ancient Near East, hospitality was of the utmost importance, and the Israelites adhered to this principle.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing that hospitality was paramount certainly makes Lot’s actions, which ultimately aimed to ensure the well-being of his guests, seem reasonable. Seow is careful to note, however, that simply because we can understand that decision in its context does not mean that we must follow its example;<sup>4</sup> after all, the modern world is very different from the Biblical world, and the same ethical norms are not necessarily applicable.

John J. McNeill also believes that the sin condemned in the story of Sodom is not homosexuality but a lack of hospitality. The evidence he cites in support of his interpretation, however, relies largely on the information provided elsewhere in Scripture. First, he argues that it is misguided to interpret this passage as specifically concerned with homosexuality because “there is no evidence elsewhere in the passage or in the Old Testament to show that homosexual behavior was particularly prevalent in these cities.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the other passages in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament that have been traditionally cited as condemning homosexual behavior never mention Sodom.<sup>6</sup> If the Sodomites’ worst sin had truly been homosexuality, then these subsequent writings would surely have made reference to the story.

Both Seow and McNeill note that, when the story of Sodom is mentioned in other biblical passages, it is used as an example of “utter destruction occasioned by sins of such magnitude as to merit exemplary punishment.”<sup>7</sup> The authors of the Hebrew Bible reference this passage when they condemn other sins: injustice (Isa. 1:10 and 3:9); adultery and deceit (Jer. 23:14); and pride, excess, and indifference to poverty (Ezek. 16:49).<sup>8</sup> Clearly, Sodom was a city destroyed for many forms of wickedness—but not primarily for homosexuality. This claim is supported by evidence in the New Testament. Jesus himself speaks of Sodom when he discusses the uncongenial reception that his disciples will receive in Luke 10:10-13: “But whenever you come to a town and they do not welcome you [...] on that day Sodom will fare better than that town!”<sup>9</sup> Both McNeill and Seow present convincing arguments that the sin for which the Sodomites are punished is not their demand to “know” the visitors—that is, their homosexuality—but their wholly inhospitable behavior. These interpretations suggest that the story of Sodom does not condemn homosexuality, and should therefore not be used to claim that it is unethical. But this contention is complicated when the story is considered in conjunction with other biblical texts.

The Hebrew Bible contains another passage that has been central to the debate about homosexuality and Christian ethics. The Holiness Code in the book of Leviticus contains two verses that seem to address this issue: Leviticus 18:22<sup>10</sup> and Leviticus 20:13<sup>11</sup>. The apparent condemnations of homosexuality—or at least of homosexual behavior—are more explicit in these passages than in the story of Sodom, and the punishment for committing the sin is harsh indeed. It comes as no surprise, then, that some scholars believe that these passages *do* condemn homosexuality as we understand it today.

Mark Allan Powell relies on the importance of contextualization to make his argument. In response to the claim that the Levitical texts refer to acts between

male temple prostitutes who were members of idolatrous cults, Powell points out that the passages do not restrict their denunciation of homosexuality to such individuals.<sup>12</sup> Applying a similar close reading of the texts, Powell further concludes that these scriptural prohibitions were not intended to be linked to a particular ideological agenda. He writes that “sexual intercourse between men is not condemned because it fails to produce offspring, or because it defies some ancient purity code, or because it undermines a patriarchal evaluation of men as superior to women, or for any other discernable reason. It is simply prohibited, period, as activity that is an ‘abomination’ to God.”<sup>13</sup>

Although Powell seems confident that these passages are clear in their unqualified condemnation of homosexuality, he is also careful to emphasize the importance of context in using Scripture to make ethical judgments. The Holiness Code has been problematic for modern Christians: because it is a part of the Bible, it cannot be ignored, but most churches have not affirmed all of its injunctions. Many of the specific prohibitions in the Code, such as planting multiple types of crops in one field, are largely irrelevant for modern American Christians. Others, however, such as the commands against incest and adultery, are almost universally applied.<sup>14</sup> The problem, then, is determining which commands are still normative for a Christian ethic. Powell offers a solution, pointing out that the primary criterion for making such a decision has traditionally been whether the injunctions of the Holiness Code are reiterated elsewhere in the Bible: if subsequent authors reaffirm these commands, they should be incorporated into a modern Christian ethical framework. Some of Paul’s writings (1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10, and Romans 1:18-32) do precisely that, which leads Powell to conclude that “Paul might be viewed as carrying the prohibitions from Leviticus over into the New Testament, indicating that they *do* apply to Christians.”<sup>15</sup>

But not all modern scholars share Powell’s interpretation. Jeffrey S. Siker, for example, suggests that it is wrong to interpret the texts from Leviticus as explicit condemnations of homosexuality; instead, he suggests that Christians must determine “what *constitutes* the sin of same-sex relations [...] and] what it is that makes homosexual practices sinful, rather than merely assuming the sinfulness of all homosexual expressions.”<sup>16</sup> Applying this interpretive lens to the verses in Leviticus, he suggests that the true nature of the sin is engaging in idolatrous or pagan practices, or otherwise acting contrary to human nature, as it was understood by the text’s authors.<sup>17</sup> McNeill supports this position, observing that “the Code specifically warns the Israelites against accepting idolatrous practices,” and concludes that the passages in Leviticus serve primarily to “[establish] the connec-

tion between idolatry and homosexual activity.”<sup>18</sup> It seems that homosexuality is simply the medium by which the real sins of idolatry, paganism, and unnatural action are expressed; it is not the actual sin in question.

Other authors who share Siker’s belief that the injunctions against homosexuality in the Holiness Code are not normative for Christian ethics ground their arguments in the importance of considering historical context. Gwen B. Saylor considers these texts in terms of “theological anthropology”—the theological frameworks that informed the worldviews of the Biblical authors. She observes that the Holiness Code was written in an age when “the critical importance of keeping categories separate, of avoiding any kind of hybridization” was consistently emphasized.<sup>19</sup> Many of the other laws set forth in Leviticus, such as those regarding proper dress for men and women, support this position. Therefore, she contends that the laws of Leviticus exist primarily to guard against the “mixing of gender-role categories.” Indeed, it is because male-male intercourse involves the penetration of the male—a role traditionally ascribed to the female—that it is condemned. It is not homosexuality, but the confusion of gender roles, that is the “abomination.”<sup>20</sup> Victor Furnish articulates a similar position, observing that the verses concerning homosexuality are situated within the laws regarding ritual purity—“what is clean and unclean in a quite objective sense seen as distinct from spiritual or moral purity.”<sup>21</sup> This leads him to draw the same conclusion as Saylor: that “it is not the morality of male same-sex relationships [...] that underlies the taboo; same-sex intercourse is viewed as a mixing of roles.”<sup>22</sup>

It is not only textual and theological context that scholars use to support this position, however. Many also emphasize the historical context of the Holiness Code. Walter Wink, for example, points out that the ancient Israelites did not understand the biological processes of reproduction: they believed that the female body was simply an incubator, and that male semen contained all of the necessary material to create life. Therefore, any “spilling of semen for any nonprocreative purpose [...] was considered tantamount to murder.”<sup>23</sup> Wink’s subsequent suggestion that the Israelites were particularly concerned with procreation because they were so vastly outnumbered in society is corroborated by McNeill, who observes that “the profertility bent of the Old Testament authors was due to underpopulation, with the result that any willful destruction of human seed was regarded as a serious crime.”<sup>24</sup> It seems, then, that homosexuality may have been condemned because it threatened the future of the Israelite population. This concern, however, is clearly no longer relevant; as Wink observes, the morality of such a position is “rendered questionable in a word facing uncontrolled overpopulation.”<sup>25</sup> Because

modern society no longer emphasizes the division of gender roles as strongly as the ancient Israelites did, and because underpopulation is no longer a problem that Christians must address, these authors believe that the passages from Leviticus do not condemn homosexuality, in the modern sense, as unethical.

These discussions about the meaning of Scripture are clearly complicated, and many voices have articulated well-supported arguments on both sides of the debate. Although the passages from Genesis and Leviticus are certainly important texts for Christians to consider as they make decisions about how homosexuality fits into a specifically Christian ethic, they are not the passages on which much of the most intense debates have been focused. That distinction belongs to a passage in Paul's letter to the Romans: Romans 1:18-32.<sup>26</sup> There are many possible reasons that these verses have been the primary battleground in the war over homosexuality: Paul's powerful influence on the development of early Christian churches, the authority his writings have traditionally been afforded, the sheer number of texts with which he is credited, or any combination of those (and multitudinous other) factors. Much like opinions are divided about the meaning of the Holiness Code's injunctions against homosexuality, scholars who debate the Pauline discussion of the issue can be separated into two groups: those who believe that Paul *does* condemn homosexuality as we understand it today, and those who believe that he does *not*.

Many of the scholars who contend that this passage from Romans should be interpreted as a condemnation of homosexuality begin their arguments with a discussion of the creation stories in the first and second chapters of Genesis. Ulrich Mauser uses this strategy to analyze the text, demonstrating that the "conceptuality of [Paul's] argument [is based on] the creation narratives at the beginning of Genesis."<sup>27</sup> Mauser further argues that the primary principle Paul derives from these accounts and subsequently uses to inform his discussion of homosexuality (and all the questions about sexuality that he addresses) is "the creation of the one human form of life in the polarity of male and female."<sup>28</sup> Because the Genesis narratives can now be seen in a new eschatological light—a recognition that the coming of the kingdom "heightens the demand expected in sexual behavior [...] and stretches Old Testament legislation into the arena of apocalyptic disaster"<sup>29</sup>—Paul's writings reflect a distinct awareness of the importance of right sexual behavior in the context of the male-female polarity. Indeed, Mauser contends, this concern is paramount in the Pauline text; any practice that "[distorts] or [abolishes] this one crucial reality of being human is seen in the New Testament as outrage against the Creator."<sup>30</sup> For Paul, then, homosexuality is more than just a sin—it is

a complete deformation of humanity at its most fundamental level because it is a denial, in both practical and theoretical terms, that God's creation of the male-female polarity is good.<sup>31</sup>

David E. Malick shares this view, placing a similar emphasis on the importance of maintaining the created order. He contends that Paul's condemnation of homosexuality is rooted not in the customs of Hellenistic Judaism, but in the same creation accounts that Mauser cites. Indeed, Paul conceives of homosexuality as evidence of "the fall of the race from God's design and from the natural, moral pattern of God for sexual expression."<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Paul's focus on homosexuality as a violation of God's transcultural created order is evidence that Paul was not simply imposing Jewish customs on a Hellenistic world, and that the ethical judgment he sets forth, because it transcends social and historical context, remains applicable to modern society.

Malick also addresses the claim that Paul's writings in Romans 1 condemn only "perverted" homosexuality. He suggests that the movement away from heterosexuality to homosexuality (vv. 26-27) occurs within a context of movement away from natural sexual expression and from normal social behavior (vv. 24-32), demonstrating Paul's belief that homosexuality is a movement away from God's design and is, therefore, immoral.<sup>33</sup> In his view, homosexuality does not have to be linked to specific acts to be unethical. Stanley Grenz also rejects imposing this sort of specificity on the text, asserting that Paul's condemnation is not limited to "perverted" acts such as pederasty. He cites the mention of female-female relations in verse 26 as evidence that Paul's argument applies universally to homosexuality, and not just to specific, male-male cultic practices.<sup>34</sup> This widespread applicability, in Grenz's opinion, indicates Paul's belief that homosexuality should be condemned as a fundamental perversion of God's created design, not simply as an isolated unethical action.<sup>35</sup>

There is, however, another side to the debate about the meaning of this passage from Romans. Scholars who disagree with the arguments summarized above have adopted a variety of strategies to demonstrate that, despite what seems to be an obvious condemnation, Paul does not actually denounce homosexuality as it is understood in the modern sense. Victor Furnish makes this case on two levels: first, he suggests that Paul would have been incapable of making a distinction between "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" because the concept of sexual orientation simply didn't exist; and second, he suggests that, because these terms would necessarily have been absent from Paul's vocabulary, theology, and ethical framework, to use them when translating texts is "anachronistic and



misleading.”<sup>36</sup> For Furnish, as for many ethicists, the danger is clear: imposing modern understandings of sexual orientation on a text whose author was familiar only with sexual actions necessarily leads to misinterpretation.

Walter Wink echoes these concerns, emphasizing the difference between sexual orientation, which a person cannot control, and sexual actions, which a person can.<sup>37</sup> This is an important distinction because it suggests that Paul’s writings specifically address heterosexual individuals who willfully engage in same-sex erotic behaviors—the only sort of “homosexuality” with which he would have been familiar. Wink contends that the behaviors Paul condemns are not “relationships between consenting adults who are committed to each other as faithfully and with as much integrity as any heterosexual couple;” instead, they are based solely on lust.<sup>38</sup> Numerous other ethicists share this position: for example, Brian K. Blount suggests that, because unnatural same-sex behavior was viewed as a choice, it was frequently associated with “insatiable lust.”<sup>39</sup> Jeffrey Siker elaborates on this argument, noting that Paul’s only experience with homosexual behaviors would likely have been indirect, and even then, it would only have been to witness “exploitative forms of homoerotic expression—particularly pederasty and prostitution.”<sup>40</sup> Both of these practices are condemned elsewhere in the Bible as lustful and sinful, so it comes as no surprise that Paul would echo those denunciations.

Another key component of this side of the debate is, interestingly enough, the question of sexual expression and its relationship to God’s created, natural order—the same question that scholars who support the opposite interpretation have discussed. The intended meaning of the word “unnatural” in the passage is somewhat ambiguous; McNeill, for example, observes that Paul probably did not distinguish between “natural law and social custom.”<sup>41</sup> This observation has two important implications. First, it suggests that the behaviors Paul condemns are homoerotic acts by heterosexual individuals who voluntarily choose to act contrary to their nature. Second, it suggests that Paul’s social context (devoid of any concept of sexual orientation) is inextricably present in the text, and that the passage, therefore, cannot be read as a condemnation of homosexuality in modern terms.<sup>42</sup>

Wink also acknowledges the importance of understanding how Paul’s text relates to his ideas about God’s created order. The behaviors he condemns are “unnatural” because they are heterosexual individuals’ voluntary choices to act against their natural attraction to the opposite sex. Wink believes that it is this *principle* that is important. Paul is condemning sexual behavior that runs counter

to an individual's nature—not homosexuality. In fact, a homosexual individual's participation in sexual activities with a member of the opposite sex would be a corollary rejection of his or her natural orientation.<sup>43</sup>

For some scholars, even the idea of the “natural order” is not a transcultural one; instead, its meaning is rooted in its context. Gwen Saylor suggests that Paul's primary concern is to maintain the boundaries between males and females. Much like the verses from Leviticus, the passage from Romans ultimately focuses on “proper gender role distinction.”<sup>44</sup> In sexual practice, this distinction was between the active male who penetrates the passive female. Clearly, then, two heterosexual men who engage in homoerotic behavior act contrary to their nature: “one partner has violated the male role that is by nature his, and by taking advantage of this, the other person has also violated his male role.”<sup>45</sup> This understanding, of course, is firmly rooted in the same theological anthropology that Saylor employs in her discussion of Leviticus—a limited, hierarchical, patriarchal society that is necessarily limited to its context. Therefore, Paul's condemnation of homosexuality cannot be seen as normative for making ethical judgments about modern sexual practices.

Instead of emphasizing the importance of specific contexts, however, some scholars have chosen to interpret Romans 1:26-27 as representative of larger themes in the Bible. Robin Scroggs, for example, claims that Paul's reference to homosexuality is part of “a major *theological* goal; ethical concerns or admonitions lie far from his purpose.”<sup>46</sup> Instead of passing ethical judgments about specific practices, Paul's text aims to emphasize the importance of God's grace. Although Paul may condemn homosexual behavior, he uses it only to illustrate his larger agenda: demonstrating that humanity has fallen into a “false reality” from which God's grace is the only means of salvation.<sup>47</sup>

Turning to a discussion of these larger themes is a useful way of broadening our consideration of homosexuality and Scripture. A perplexing dilemma emerges when we attempt to derive an ethical judgment about homosexuality from the Bible: there simply aren't many passages that mention it. This relative absence of scriptural sources raises important questions. Because there are so few references to homosexuality in the Bible, and because some of those references are implicit or have unclear meanings, can Christians even use Scripture to form ethical judgments about homosexuality? Despite these difficulties, Christians not only *can*; they *must*. Instead of relying on interpretations of isolated passages, however, it may be more useful for Christians to understand how those passages relate to the Bible's larger themes.

Jeffrey Siker shares this viewpoint, writing that he “was surprised to learn that scripture says almost nothing about homosexuality.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, in the few pas-

sages where it does, it does not address homosexuality or homosexual relationships in the modern sense. Siker therefore concludes that the best way to understand homosexuality and scripture is to look for thematic guidance. He focuses on the parable of the wheat and the chaff,<sup>49</sup> suggesting that its model of inclusivity and affirmation of human dignity should inform a normative Christian ethic. Although the Bible does not specifically tell Christians how to relate to homosexual individuals, it *does* tell them that all human beings have worth and calls for “the inclusion of those who, even to our surprise, have received the Spirit of God and join us in our Christian confession.”<sup>50</sup>

This Biblical affirmation of human worth is perhaps best expressed by Jesus’ rule of love: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>51</sup> For many scholars, this command is the lens through which all of Scripture should be interpreted and the model all Christians should strive to emulate; indeed, it is the foundation on which a Christian ethic should be constructed. Robin Scroggs describes the importance of this principle of love, contending that it is “the central affirmation of biblical faith which forms the context in which all Scripture must be interpreted” and should therefore be the primary criterion used to make ethical judgments about homosexuality.<sup>52</sup> Victor Furnish, too, argues against focusing the debate on specific texts; instead, he advocates using the “gospel of grace” that makes Scripture unique as a framework for shaping the Christian community’s response to homosexuals and homosexuality.<sup>53</sup>

Patrick D. Miller is perhaps the strongest advocate for the primacy of the love command. Although he does not discourage the use of the Bible in making ethical judgments, he cautions that “interpretation of scripture in the church should not happen without attention to the rule of faith and the rule of love.”<sup>54</sup> In his opinion, the specific commands expressed in the Bible must be read in terms of these two rules; therefore, if an interpretation of a text leads Christians to exclude or fail to love others, that interpretation must be reevaluated.<sup>55</sup> Walter Wink shares this belief, arguing that, because the Bible never expresses a clear sexual ethic that can be universally applied, the best way to make an ethical judgment about sexual behavior is to do so in light of Jesus’ love command.<sup>56</sup> If these scholars are correct, it seems reasonable to conclude that a relationship between two Christians that exemplifies the ideal of “loving your neighbor as yourself” is an ethical one, gender and sexual orientation notwithstanding. Indeed, McNeill adopts this position, asserting that “a general consideration of human sexuality in the Bible leads to only one certain conclusion: those sexual relations can be justified morally which are a true expression of human love.”<sup>57</sup> This understanding of biblical

themes suggests that loving, homosexual relationships are ethical as long as they represent an individual's best attempt to lead a life that is an expression of Jesus' love command.

While the debates about the meaning of Scripture and its relative importance in context of the Bible's overarching themes are important, they are not the only elements to consider when making an ethical judgment about homosexuality. Indeed, a Christian ethic is more than just a theoretical or ideological framework; it is also a practical means of relating to the world. Therefore, any consideration of Christian ethics must involve a discussion of how judgments, whether they are derived from the Bible, from tradition, from experience, or from some other combination of sources, are translated into action. Few scholars seem willing to advocate completely excluding homosexuals from Christian communities, which may be because they recognize that the Bible's primary teaching seems to be, however simply, to *love*. Instead, two models for a Christian response to homosexuality have emerged: a model of qualified inclusion and a model of unqualified inclusion.

Some of the scholars who address these questions have concluded that an appropriate Christian response to homosexuals is to offer them a sort of qualified inclusion—to include them as members of a Christian community, but only if they meet certain criteria. Lewis B. Smedes, despite conceding that homosexual orientation may not be a choice, does not embrace homosexual individuals as they are. Instead, he relies on a traditional interpretation of the creation narratives (that is, a belief that God created humanity in a male-female polarity designed for procreative purposes)<sup>58</sup> to inform his conviction that homosexuality is an example of “nature sometimes gone awry.”<sup>59</sup> But, because God created homosexuals just as he created heterosexuals, Smedes concludes that “God wants gay people to make the best life they can within the limits of what errant nature gives them.”<sup>60</sup>

Other responses to homosexuality and homosexuals, however, are less forgiving. Although Stanley Grenz does acknowledge that homosexuality may be an orientation, he is unwilling to discount the role of individual choice. He asserts that “Christian ethics maintains that personal responsibility is not limited to matters in which we exercise full choice.”<sup>61</sup> All people are, by nature, “enslaved to sin,” and the Bible does not excuse any individual from responsibility for that sin, even if he or she did not consciously choose to behave sinfully. Therefore, homosexuality should not be condoned or excused, even if it is a biologically reality. Furthermore, Grenz contends that “ethics is not merely a condoning of what comes naturally”; instead, living an ethical Christian life often involves mak-

ing decisions that are contrary to the “natural inclinations” that are evidence of humanity’s fallenness.<sup>62</sup> This, too, suggests that Christians should not embrace homosexuals without expecting them to try to rise above their “fallen” nature.

Both Smedes and Grenz offer suggestions about the criteria that might help determine whether to include homosexuals in a Christian community. Although he never explicitly states that homosexuals should attempt to become heterosexual, Grenz devotes considerable time to discussing the arguments that such a transformation is possible, suggesting that a transition from homosexuality to heterosexuality will correct the “truncated sexual development [...] that] falls short of God’s ideal in creation.”<sup>63</sup> Although he is careful to indicate that no Christian is necessarily *required* to make such a transition, Grenz does insist that homosexuals and heterosexuals alike must be expected to “[lead] exemplary [lives, which] means that they have forsaken all sinful sexual practices associated with their orientation.”<sup>64</sup> Because Grenz believes that all homosexual acts fall short of God’s created order and are therefore necessarily sinful, however, this seems to imply that celibacy is necessary before homosexuals can be included in Christian community. Smedes shares this opinion, writing that it is only when “celibacy is not possible” that other expressions of homosexual behavior might even be *considered* as acceptable in a Christian ethical framework.<sup>65</sup>

Other Christian voices call for full inclusion of homosexuals, however. Jeffrey Siker suggests looking back to history and Scripture, using the inclusion of the Gentiles into early Christian communities as a model for including homosexuals in modern communities. He argues that, just as Peter and Paul were motivated by love to welcome Gentiles who did not adhere to Jewish law to the church, modern Christians are called by God and compelled by love to “move beyond marginal toleration of homosexual Christians and welcome their full inclusion.”<sup>66</sup> Moreover, Gentiles were not sinners by definition, because the Holy Spirit was more important than adhering to the law; similarly, the Spirit is more important than sexual behavior in guiding the lives of modern homosexual Christians.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, just as Gentiles were welcomed into the church two thousand years ago, so should homosexuals be welcomed into the church today.

Choon-Leong Seow also advocates the use of other Biblical texts as a way to understand how to construct an inclusive Christian ethic. He suggests reading the wisdom literature<sup>68</sup> to reveal that, although God is undoubtedly the Creator, his “creation does include irregularities and unevenness—anomalies that no human being can explain or change.”<sup>69</sup> The implication here is clear: a homosexual orientation is one of the “anomalies” of God’s creation. This does not necessarily

mean that it is a sin, and it is certainly not a justifiable basis for excluding any individual from the Christian community. Most importantly, Seow suggests that the wisdom literature, because it expresses themes that do not appear elsewhere in the Bible, is particularly valuable: it allows Christians to “[give] credence to science and experience” without having to worry about being “unscriptural.”<sup>70</sup> Instead, integrating personal experience, modern knowledge, and Biblical text becomes a viable ethical method that opens the door for the inclusion of homosexuals. Even if Christians do incorporate the principles of wisdom literature into their ethical frameworks, however, they must always remember that how they interpret Scripture must correlate with how they live. Patrick D. Miller reiterates the importance of Jesus’ love command, concluding that any interpretation that justifies “[inflicting] pain or [putting] down other Christians—or human beings of any stripe—is under question.”<sup>71</sup> Excluding another Christian from the community is certainly one way of inflicting pain, and if Miller is correct, then the interpretations of the Bible that advocate such treatment must be *misinterpretations*. Therefore, they should be revisited, and Christians should work to come to an understanding of Scripture that is in keeping with the all-important rule of love.

Perhaps the most important implication of a practical application of an ethical judgment is that these questions are not merely questions about textual interpretation or ethical method. They are not merely questions about how to move between the biblical and modern worlds. They are not merely questions about translation, about historical context, or about authorship. They are questions about *people*—real, flesh-and-blood, living-and-breathing human beings. The ethical conclusions that Christians draw, therefore, have significant consequences, and must not be taken lightly.

The diverse perspectives discussed in this paper demonstrate that it is never easy to derive an absolutely conclusive ethic from Scripture—especially when the lives of real people are concerned. Although the Bible is an important reference, it should not be the only source that Christians use to make an ethical judgment about homosexuality. Instead, Christians should combine a variety of approaches. First, they should study the scriptural passages that discuss homosexuality, paying particular attention to historical context and the Bible’s larger themes. Second, they should remember that Jesus’ love command is the primary criterion for establishing a normative Christian ethic. Finally, they should consider their personal experiences with homosexuals, reflecting carefully on the lessons they have learned. By integrating these different strategies, Christians will be better equipped to make an informed, compassionate judgment about homosexuality that is true to Christian tradition, to Christian scripture, and to the example of Christ himself.

## TEXTUAL REFERENCES (NRSV)

### Genesis 19:1-11

<sup>1</sup> The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. <sup>2</sup> He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." <sup>3</sup> But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.

<sup>4</sup> But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; <sup>5</sup> and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." <sup>6</sup> Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, <sup>7</sup> and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. <sup>8</sup> Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." <sup>9</sup> But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. <sup>10</sup> But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. <sup>11</sup> And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.

### Leviticus 18:22

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

### Leviticus 20:13

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.

### Romans 1:18-32

<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; <sup>21</sup> for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools; <sup>23</sup> and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

<sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.



<sup>26</sup> For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, <sup>27</sup>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.

<sup>28</sup> And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. <sup>29</sup>They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, <sup>30</sup>slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, <sup>31</sup>foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. <sup>32</sup>They know God's decree, that those who practise such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practise them.

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## NOTES

(Endnotes)

1. Gen. 19:1-11 NRSV (New Revised Standard Version).
2. Choon-Leong Seow, "Textual Orientation," in *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 22.
3. Ibid., 21.
4. Ibid., 22.
5. John J. McNeill, "Scripture and Homosexuality," in *The Church and the Homosexual: Fourth Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 43.
6. Ibid, 46.
7. Ibid, 46.
8. Seow, 22.
9. McNeill, 45.
10. You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. (Lev. 18:22, NRSV.)
11. 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. (Lev. 20:13, NRSV.)
12. Mark Allan Powell, "The Bible and Homosexuality," in *Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality*, ed. James M. Childs (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 23.
13. Ibid, 24.
14. Ibid, 24. This claim is conversant with the arguments that other scholars who oppose his view have articulated; those claims will be subsequently considered.
15. Powell, 25.
16. Jeffrey S. Siker, "Gentile Wheat and Homosexual Christians: New Testament Directions for the Heterosexual Church," in *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 137.
17. Ibid, 137.
18. McNeill, 57.
19. Gwen B. Saylor, "Beyond the Biblical Impasse: Homosexuality Through the

- Lens of Theological Anthropology," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44 (2005): 82.
20. *Ibid*, 83.
21. Victor Paul Furnish, "What Does the Bible Say About Homosexuality?," in *Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality*, ed. Sally B. Geis and Donald E. Messer (Nashville: Abington Press, 1994), 60.
22. *Ibid*, 61.
23. Walter Wink, "Homosexuality and the Bible," in *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 34.
24. McNeill, 58.
25. Wink, 35.
26. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup>For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup>Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; <sup>21</sup>for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. <sup>22</sup>Claiming to be wise, they became fools; <sup>23</sup>and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. <sup>24</sup>Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup>because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen. <sup>26</sup>For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, <sup>27</sup>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. <sup>28</sup>And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. <sup>29</sup>They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, <sup>30</sup>slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, <sup>31</sup>foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. <sup>32</sup>They know God's decree, that those who practise such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practise them. (Rom. 1:18-32, NRSV.)
27. Ulrich W. Mauser, "Creation and Human Sexuality in the New Testament," in *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 11.
28. *Ibid*, 12.
29. *Ibid*, 13.
30. *Ibid*, 12.
31. *Ibid*, 13.
32. David E. Malick, "The Condemnation of Homosexuality in Romans 1:26-27," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (1993): 332-333.
33. *Ibid*, 337.
34. Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 230.
35. Grenz, 230.

36. Furnish, 58.
37. Wink, 36.
38. Ibid, 36.
39. Brian K. Blount, "Reading and Understanding the New Testament on Homosexuality," in *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, ed. Choon-Leong Seow (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 34.
40. Siker, 143.
41. McNeill, 54.
42. Ibid, 56.
43. Wink, 36.
44. Saylor, 85.
45. Blount, 34.
46. Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 109.
47. Scroggs, 114.
48. Siker, 140.
49. He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; <sup>25</sup>but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. <sup>26</sup>So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. <sup>27</sup>And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" <sup>28</sup>He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" <sup>29</sup>But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. <sup>30</sup>Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn." ' (Matt. 13:24-30, NRSV.)
50. Siker, 150.
51. Matt. 22:39, NRSV.
52. Scroggs, 10.
53. Furnish, 64.
54. Patrick D. Miller, "What the Scriptures Principally Teach," in *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, ed. Choon-Leong Seow (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 58.
55. Ibid, 59.
56. Wink, 45.
57. McNeill, 65.
58. Lewis Smedes, "Exploring the Morality of Homosexuality," in *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*, ed. Walter Wink (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 78.
59. Ibid, 81.
60. Ibid, 81.
61. Grenz, 231.
62. Ibid, 230.
63. Ibid, 235.
64. Ibid, 246.
65. Smedes, 82.
66. Siker, 146.
67. Ibid, 150.
68. Specifically, Seow discusses passages from the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job.

69. Seow, 30.

70. Ibid, 31.

71. Miller, 60.