



# themelios

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**THE GOSPEL COALITION**

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## DESCRIPTION

*Themelios* is an international evangelical theological journal that expounds and defends the historic Christian faith. Its primary audience is theological students and pastors, though scholars read it as well. It was formerly a print journal operated by RTSF/UCCF in the UK, and it became a digital journal operated by The Gospel Coalition in 2008. The new editorial team seeks to preserve representation, in both essayists and reviewers, from both sides of the Atlantic.

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## Why Evangelicals Should Ignore Brian McLaren: How the New Testament Requires Evangelicals to Render a Judgment on the Moral Status of Homosexuality

— Denny Burk —

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In 2006 on *Christianity Today's* leadership blog, Pastor Brian McLaren urged evangelical leaders to find a “Pastoral Response” to their parishioners on the issue of homosexuality. In short, he argued that the Bible is not clear on the moral status of homosexuality and that the ancient ethic of the Christian church offends moderns too much to be useful. He calls, therefore, upon evangelicals to stop talking about the issue. Here he is in his own words:

Frankly, many of us don't know what we should think about homosexuality. We've heard all sides but no position has yet won our confidence so that we can say “it seems good to the Holy Spirit and us.” . . . If we think that there may actually be a legitimate context for some homosexual relationships, we know that the biblical arguments are nuanced and multilayered, and the pastoral ramifications are staggeringly complex. We aren't sure if or where lines are to be drawn, nor do we know how to enforce with fairness whatever lines are drawn.

Perhaps we need a five-year moratorium on making pronouncements. In the meantime, we'll practice prayerful Christian dialogue, listening respectfully, disagreeing agreeably. When decisions need to be made, they'll be admittedly provisional. We'll keep our ears attuned to scholars in biblical studies, theology, ethics, psychology, genetics, sociology, and related fields. Then in five years, if we have clarity, we'll speak; if not, we'll set another five years for ongoing reflection.<sup>1</sup>

That Brian McLaren's opinion on this matter carries weight in the evangelical movement is hardly disputable. There was a reason that *Time* magazine selected him in 2005 as one of the twenty-five most influential evangelicals.<sup>2</sup> He stands at the vanguard of the Emergent movement, and a whole sector of professing evangelicals gives considerable weight to his opinions.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian McLaren, “Brian McLaren on the Homosexual Question: Finding a Pastoral Response,” [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian\\_mclaren\\_o.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/01/brian_mclaren_o.html), accessed April 3, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> “The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America,” *Time* (February 7, 2005): 45. The article in *Time* reports that when McLaren was asked to comment on gay “marriage,” he replied, “You know what, the thing that breaks my heart is that there's no way I can answer it without hurting someone on either side.”

Nevertheless, with still a year remaining on his moratorium, Brian McLaren has made a moral pronouncement on the moral status of homosexuality. In his 2010 book *A New Kind of Christianity*, McLaren seeks to redefine the Christian faith for a new day, and in one chapter in particular he argues that traditional evangelicals need to abandon their 2,000-year old ethic on homosexuality. He pillories their beliefs as “fundasexuality,” which he defines as a “reactive, combative brand of religious *fundamentalism* that preoccupies itself with *sexuality*. . . . It is a kind of *heterophobia*: the fear of people who are different.”<sup>3</sup> Traditional evangelicals, he argues, need an enemy against which they can coalesce in common cause: “Groups can exist without a god, but no group can exist without a devil. Some individual or group needs to be identified as the enemy. . . . Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people are an ideal choice for this kind of scapegoating.”<sup>4</sup> For McLaren, evangelicals who treat homosexuals as sinners are really just looking for an enemy—a scapegoat. In other words, traditionalist faith is less about theology than it is about psychology. Evangelicals need someone to loathe, and homosexuals are the unfortunate target. What is clear in all of this is that McLaren has come to definitive conclusions on the matter in spite of what he said in 2006. That McLaren has broken his own moratorium shows how untenable a suggestion it was in the first place.

Nevertheless, it is worth considering McLaren’s 2006 prescription on its own merits. What if evangelicals would have taken his advice four years ago? What if none of us had been talking about this issue from 2006 to 2010? Would we have missed out on anything? Would there have been lost opportunities for discipling God’s people or for being salt and light in the culture? I think the answer to these questions is an unqualified *yes*.

Since 2006, the larger debate in American culture over the moral status of homosexuality has only increased, not diminished. Some would point to the United States as an exemplar of the controversy unfolding around the world.<sup>5</sup> In 2006, only one state in America (Massachusetts) sanctioned same-sex unions. Today, there are five states and the District of Columbia.<sup>6</sup> Since 2006, activists have effectively applied the logic of the civil rights movement to the issue of same-sex “marriage.” In Iowa, for instance, the state supreme court has declared homosexuals to be a protected class. Thus, “marriage” must be treated as a civil right protected in law. The upshot of this logic in the wider culture is that advocates

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<sup>3</sup> Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 174–75.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>5</sup> The focus here is on the debate in America because that is McLaren’s context. It is worth mentioning, of course, that this issue is fiercely contested around the world. In 2007, for example, a Christian magistrate in Great Britain lost a landmark legal action against the British government claiming he was discriminated against by being forced to place children with gay couples. See Steve Doughty, “Christian JP can’t opt out of gay adoptions,” *Daily Mail* (March 2, 2007), 1st edition, p. 45. Another example is a recent controversy in Uganda surrounding a bill that would criminalize homosexuality. The furor caused a rift between Ugandan and American Christians. See Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Anti-Homosexuality Bill Divides Ugandan and American Christians,” *Christianity Today* (December 17, 2009 [web-only]), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/decemberweb-only/151-41.0.html>, accessed July 7, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Same-sex “marriage” is legal in Massachusetts, Vermont, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Iowa, and the District of Columbia ([www.freedomtomarry.org/states](http://www.freedomtomarry.org/states), accessed May 25, 2010). In each of the states, gay “marriage” became legal by court decision or legislation. Gay “marriage” has failed in every state that has put the matter to a popular vote. In both California and Maine, gay “marriage” was first legalized and then overturned by popular vote.

of heterosexual monogamy are not regarded merely as foot-dragging traditionalists, but as morally retrograde bigots.<sup>7</sup> Evangelicals are right to ask how Christians can be salt and light in this kind of a culture while having no clear, biblical word on homosexuality.

The missed opportunities, however, are not merely within the domain of the current culture war. Christian churches and denominations have also been wrestling with this issue since McLaren's pronouncement in 2006. Mainline Christian denominations in the United States are increasingly divided on the issue. The crisis in the worldwide Anglican Communion is likely beyond the point of repair. The Episcopal Church in the USA has defied the expressed wishes of the wider Anglican Communion by continuing its ordination of bishops who are practicing homosexuals. Just this year, a majority of bishops and dioceses of the Episcopal Church approved the election of the church's second openly gay bishop, the Rev. Mary D. Glasspool.<sup>8</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams proposes not to discipline the schismatic American church, but to create a two-party system for the Anglican Communion—one that supports the normalization of homosexuality and one that does not. Through the past decade, many conservatives within the Episcopal Church have departed, by one means or another, and have now organized themselves into an alternative Anglican province, the Anglican Church of North America.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the religious case for so-called gay "marriage" remains a powerful one in other mainlines. The argument has spread into more popular venues as well. Lisa Miller made the religious case for gay "marriage" in a major article for *Newsweek* magazine, and she did so on the basis of revisionist scholars who are not observing any moratorium on talking about these issues.<sup>10</sup>

In the midst of these massive cultural and ecclesiological shifts, Pastor McLaren has urged evangelicals to be silent. The bad news is that Christians who heeded McLaren's advice have missed four years' worth of opportunities to be salt and light in the midst of a morally confused culture. The good news is that there is only one year left! Nevertheless, McLaren is not the only one to have jumped the gun. In the Fall of 2008, Tony Jones the former national coordinator of Emergent Village (of which McLaren is a part) affirmed

that gay persons are fully human persons and should be afforded all of the cultural and ecclesial benefits that I am. . . . I now believe that GLBTQ can live lives in accord with biblical Christianity (at least as much as any of us can!) and that their monogamy can and should be sanctioned and blessed by church and state.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> E.g., on May 1, 2010, *The Washington Post's* David Weigel wrote, "I can empathize with everyone I cover except for the anti-gay marriage bigots. In 20 years no one will admit they were part of that" ("Covering same-sex marriage," [http://voices.washingtonpost.com/right-now/2010/05/covering\\_gay\\_marriage.html](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/right-now/2010/05/covering_gay_marriage.html), accessed May 25, 2010). See also Frank Rich, "The Bigots' Last Hurrah," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2009: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/19/opinion/19Rich.html>, accessed May 25, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Laurie Goodstein, "Episcopalians Confirm a Second Gay Bishop," *The New York Times*, March 17, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/18/us/18bishop.html>, accessed May 25, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> See "Our Genesis," Anglican Church of North America, [http://anglicanchurch.net/media/acna\\_our\\_genesis\\_june\\_2009WITHLINKS.pdf](http://anglicanchurch.net/media/acna_our_genesis_june_2009WITHLINKS.pdf), accessed May 25, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Miller cites Alan Segal, Neill Elliot, and *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* as authorities and concludes, "Religious objections to gay marriage are rooted not in the Bible at all, then, but in custom and tradition." She also quotes Walter Brueggemann in favor of gay "marriage."

<sup>11</sup> Tony Jones, "How I Went from There to Here: Same Sex Marriage Blogalogue" (November 19, 2008), <http://blog.beliefnet.com/tonyjones/2008/11/same-sex-marriage-blogalogue-h.html>.

Jones' pronouncement and many others like it show how untenable McLaren's advice was from the outset. From a New Testament ethics perspective, it simply will not do to postpone judgment on this question. We dare not be content to shrug our shoulders at the issue saying, "The Christian church's 2,000 year-old ethic is too offensive in the modern world, and we are not sure what the Bible says about it anyway." McLaren's remarks raise questions about the Bible's meaning and authority. These issues lie at the heart of the discipline of New Testament ethics, and McLaren's words deserve a response from a New Testament ethics perspective.

My aim in this essay is not to comprehensively survey Brian McLaren's views on homosexuality. Nor is it my aim to refute more broadly either the emerging church or postmodernism. I refer to McLaren simply as a representative of the many voices within the emergent and progressive wings of the evangelical movement. Many in that wing agree with McLaren's claim that the Bible is not clear about the moral status of homosexuality and that Christians need not press this divisive issue since it drives away potential converts. So my aim in this paper is to interrogate these two claims concerning homosexuality from a New Testament ethics perspective. (1) Is it right for evangelicals to be silent on the issue so that Christianity might appeal more widely to the culture? (2) Is it true that the Bible is unclear about the moral status of homosexuality? We will begin with the first question.

### ***1. Should Evangelicals Be Silent?***

Is it right for evangelicals to be silent on the homosexual question so that Christianity might appeal more widely to the culture? It is true that many in the culture and in the academy regard the 2,000-year-old ethic of the Christian church as oppressive and bigoted. In fall 2008, for instance, I attended a portion of the Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender/Queer Hermeneutics Section at the 2008 Annual SBL meeting in Boston.<sup>12</sup> The LGBT/Queer Hermeneutics Section is a regular part of the program at the SBL annual meeting.<sup>13</sup> Among other things, this section aims to explore "the intersections between queer readers and biblical interpretations."<sup>14</sup> In general, participants in this section support normalizing homosexual orientation and practice. They seek to read the Bible as those who would "interrogate" traditions (biblical and otherwise) that they deem to be oppressive.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The following anecdote first appeared in Denny Burk, "Editorial: Collision of Worldviews and the Complementarian Response," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 14:1 (2009): 2–3. It will also appear in my contribution to a forthcoming volume of essays, *Don't Call It a Comeback: The Old Faith for a New Day* (ed. Kevin DeYoung; Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> "The Society of Biblical Literature is the oldest and largest international scholarly membership organization in the field of biblical studies. Founded in 1880, the Society has grown to over 8,500 international members including teachers, students, religious leaders and individuals from all walks of life who share a mutual interest in the critical investigation of the Bible" ("About SBL," <http://www.sbl-site.org/aboutus.aspx>, accessed March 23, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> "Meeting Program Units," [http://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/Congresses\\_CallForPaperDetails.aspx?MeetingId=15&VolunteerUnitId=350](http://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/Congresses_CallForPaperDetails.aspx?MeetingId=15&VolunteerUnitId=350), accessed March 23, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Jones explains that that the "queer hermeneutics" project works "in cooperation with feminist biblical interpretation." He describes it this way: "Queer readings merely seek to take one more step in the hermeneutics of suspicion and expose the 'heterosexist bias' of the Bible and Bible interpreters. Identifying exegesis as an exercise in social power, queer theorists reject the oppressive narrowness of the Bible's male/female binary vision and boldly generate textual meaning on the basis of the 'inner erotic power' of the gay interpreter" (Peter Jones,

What I heard during my visit was both startling and sobering. The presentation that I attended featured a female theologian from a seminary in Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>16</sup> She delivered a paper on Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians—a presentation that included a variety of vulgar double-entendres involving the text of Scripture and that would hardly be useful to repeat here. What was noteworthy, however, was her decidedly antagonistic stance toward the apostle Paul. She complained that Paul's letters reveal an attempt not to undermine empire but to substitute one empire for another: the Christian empire in place of the Roman empire.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Paul's politics were as flawed as Rome's. The apostle's flawed political views were no doubt informed by his flawed views of gender and his embrace of patriarchy.

One contemporary application that she drew from Scripture was that the current American political system is also flawed because it is organized on the basis of a patriarchal definition of the family. The traditional definition of the family—one man and one woman in covenanted union at the center—is a structure that oppressively limits who can have sex with whom. Thus the traditional definition of the family has become an obstacle to liberty, and the American political system is flawed because it is organized around a notion of “family” that restricts individual liberty. In effect, she was arguing that a just society would not recognize any definition of the family that limits who can have sex with whom.

Notice what she argues. It is an issue of liberty and is therefore an issue of justice. To deny one's sexual freedom is to deny them justice. It is through this kind of argument that some in our culture compare traditional Christians to slaveholders of a former generation. Both slaveholders and Christians deny freedom and justice to their fellow man. The cotton lords of the South were the bigots then. Traditional marriage supporters are the bigots now.

In the face of a culture that is growing increasingly hostile to the church's 2,000-year-old sexual ethic, it is no wonder that some “evangelicals” would elect not to offend that culture. After all, we have to live in this culture, and things are a lot easier if we do not buck societal mores. Yet at the heart of this question is the issue of authority. Who or what determines when Christians should and should not speak? If the New Testament provides a normative, universally binding ethic, then one can hardly make the case that Christians can be silent about what God's revelation says about human sexuality. If the

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“Androgyny: The Pagan Sexual Ideal,” *JETS* 43 [2000]: 444).

<sup>16</sup> The paper was delivered by Margaret Oget in a joint session of the LGBT/Queer Hermeneutics Consultation and the Bible and Cultural Studies Section at the 2008 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Boston, Massachusetts. Oget's paper was untitled in the program, but the theme for the joint session was “Intersections of Sexuality, Gender, and Empire in Biblical Interpretation.” Much of the material here is taken from her remarks during the panel discussion immediately following her paper.

<sup>17</sup> Oget addresses some of these themes in an earlier article published under what is presumably her maiden name: Margaret P. Aymer, “Empire, Alter-Empire, and the Twenty-first Century [New Testament and Roman Empire: Shifting Paradigms for Interpretation],” *USQR* 59 (2005): 140–46. She writes, “A quick perusal of Revelation makes it clear: it encodes a clear, alter-imperial rhetoric. It is alter-imperial, rather than anti-imperial, for all the rhetorics of empire pertain. The alter-empire in John's Apocalypse knows no space; stretches from the end of time until eternity; extends its rule over both body and psyche—seeking to control not only the bodies but also the hearts of those on earth (who nevertheless do not repent); and, even in the face of blood stadia high outside of the gates of the city, purports to bring about peace by means of a supernatural *bellum justum*. Clearly, John is writing in opposition to these phenomena in Rome. But in their place he proposes not what Cornel West calls the ‘Christian message of humility, and of equality among’ all people, but the much more threatening stance of alter-empire: of an empire stronger than Rome, more enduring than Rome, more all-encompassing than Rome, more bio-politically persuasive than Rome, and ultimately more capable of bringing to bear peace at any price than Rome. Similar tendencies can easily be identified in the writings of the gospels and of Paul” (145).

New Testament does not provide a normative, universally binding revelation, then it is hard to make the case for pressing its claims on contemporary people at all on any issue. This question—how the New Testament functions as a normative basis for ethics—is one of the central concerns of New Testament ethics, and those participating in the discussion do not all agree with one another.

Consider, for instance, the methodological framework for New Testament ethics that Richard Hays put forth in his watershed book *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.<sup>18</sup> Hays argues that New Testament ethics has a fourfold task: the descriptive, synthetic, hermeneutical, and pragmatic.<sup>19</sup> The descriptive task of New Testament ethics is primarily historical and exegetical—determining what the New Testament authors meant by what they wrote. The synthetic task is concerned with the canonical context of Scripture and the “possibility of coherence among the various witnesses.”<sup>20</sup> The hermeneutical task aims to relate the New Testament’s ethical content to our current situation, and the pragmatic task involves “embodying Scripture’s imperatives in the life of the Christian community.”<sup>21</sup> For Hays, the hermeneutical and pragmatic tasks must proceed from the assumption that the Bible functions as the authority over Christian faith and practice. He writes,

The canonical Scriptures constitute the *norma normans* for the church’s life, whereas every other source of moral guidance (whether church tradition, philosophical reasoning, scientific investigation, or claims about contemporary religious experience) must be understood as *norma normata*. Thus, normative Christian ethics is fundamentally a *hermeneutical* enterprise: it must begin and end in the interpretation and application of Scripture for the life of the community of faith.<sup>22</sup>

All of those writing in the area of New Testament ethics, however, do not share Hays’s insistence on the authority of Scripture. In fact, many begin their program with either an explicit or implicit setting aside of Scripture’s authority. In his 2007 work *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics*, Richard Burridge aims to base his ethics on scriptural teaching. Nevertheless, he outlines a methodology that undermines biblical authority. Burridge takes a biographical approach to New Testament ethics that insists “on the priority of the person of Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>23</sup> He says that

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<sup>18</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperOne, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. I find, however, that Hays inconsistently applies this principle. Later on in *Moral Vision*, Hays warns against forced harmonizations of the Scripture that suppress the “tensions” that exist among the various writers of the New Testament: “For example, Romans 13 and Revelation 13 are not two complementary expressions of a single principle or a single New Testament understanding of the state; rather, they represent radically different assessments of the relation of the Christian community to the Roman Empire. . . . If these texts are allowed to have their say, they will force us either to choose between them or to reject the normative claims of both” (190). This exegesis shows a fundamental inconsistency in Hays’s approach. How can the New Testament be the *norma normans* of the church’s life when the church inevitably has to “reject” one or more of the Bible’s teachings? This stance is totally incomprehensible to me. If the New Testament contradicts itself in some places (as Hays suggests is the case with Romans 13 and Revelation 13), then that undermines any claim to its authority.

<sup>23</sup> Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 4.



the key to understanding the New Testament has to be the person of Jesus, and that therefore he is the correct person and place with which to begin as well as to end. . . The biographical genre of the canonical gospels redirects our gaze back to begin with the historical Jesus, and in particular to a stress upon both his deeds and his words.<sup>24</sup>

For BurrIDGE, the Scriptures reveal a tension between Jesus' rigorous moral demands and his inclusive approach to sinners. This tension colors his reading of Paul in some unhelpful ways.<sup>25</sup> That Jesus never explicitly addresses the topic of homosexuality leads us to take Paul's prohibitions less seriously than we otherwise might. He writes,

It is puzzling why being against homosexuality, about which Jesus and the gospels have nothing to say and Paul has only these passing references alongside many other sins equally common to heterosexuals, should have become the acid test of what it means to be truly "biblical" in a number of quarters over the years. . . . [Paul's] few references to homosexuality, which occur only in his repetition of a couple of his vice-lists, should also be read in this context, rather than singled out as a primary test for the Christian fellowship.<sup>26</sup>

When BurrIDGE says that "Jesus and the gospels have nothing to say" about these issues, he echoes the objections that homosexual activists have raised for years. They protest that Jesus' silence on the issue shows that homosexuality was of little or no concern to the historical Jesus. BurrIDGE marginalizes the relevant Pauline texts by saying, "Paul's ethical comments . . . are more like 'work in progress' than being the considered, final moral word."<sup>27</sup> The upshot of BurrIDGE's approach, therefore, is that all the ethical content of the Pauline witness is subjugated to the "inclusive" framework of Jesus' ethics. When Paul disagrees with Jesus, guess who wins? BurrIDGE writes, "Paul's ethical teaching must always be balanced by his appeal to the imitation of Christ—and this entails accepting others as we have been accepted."<sup>28</sup> So BurrIDGE wants to use the Scripture, even as he adopts a methodology that undermines its authority to guide our ethical thinking.

Others more explicitly repudiate the Bible's ethical norms. They would be at the opposite end of the authority-spectrum from Hays. For them, Scripture is not the *norma normans* of the church's life because the Scripture can be normed by our own experiences and opinions. With reference to the morality of same-sex "marriage," Luke Timothy Johnson, for instance, conceives of the hermeneutical and pragmatic tasks of New Testament ethics in this way:

I have little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says, through appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties. The exegetical situation is

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 30: "We need to start with Jesus and to keep the focus on both his words and deeds, his teachings and his example; when we move on to the study of both Paul and the canonical gospels, again we will always start with Jesus."

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 129, 131. The two Pauline vice-lists that include homosexuality are in 1 Cor 6 and 1 Tim 1. BurrIDGE's remarks suggest, therefore, that he does not include Romans 1 among Paul's references to homosexuality. If so, BurrIDGE has adopted an interpretation that overlooks Paul's single most important text on this subject.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 154.

straightforward: we know what the text says. But what are we to do with what the text says? . . .

I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. And what exactly is that authority? We appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God has created us. By so doing, we explicitly reject as well the premises of the scriptural statements condemning homosexuality—namely, that it is a vice freely chosen, a symptom of human corruption, and disobedience to God’s created order.<sup>29</sup>

I have at least one thing in common with Johnson. I too have little patience with those who do hermeneutical gymnastics with Scripture in order to obscure or eliminate the Bible’s clear condemnations of homosexual behavior. But where we disagree profoundly is what we should do with the Scripture’s teaching on this matter.

How does all of this relate to our initial question? Who or what determines when Christians should and should not speak to a given moral issue? Is it okay for Christians to stop discussing their opposition to homosexuality as McLaren originally suggested? If your approach to Scripture matches that of Johnson, then clearly the answer is yes. Scriptural teaching can be trumped by other considerations external to it. If your hermeneutical framework matches Hays, then the answer is no. If Scripture is the norm that is not normed by any other norm, then we cannot set homosexuality aside as an issue of moral indifference. In other words, it is impossible to hold to biblical authority *and* follow McLaren’s view. They are mutually exclusive. We cannot be silent on this. The revisionist scholars are not silent, and we dare not be either. The stakes are too high because Paul says that *homosexuals* and *effeminate* persons will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9).<sup>30</sup> Would not evangelical silence on this issue be a death-sentence for sinners who must repent?

<sup>29</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson and Eve Tushnet, “Homosexuality and the Church: Two Views,” *Commonweal* (June 15, 2007): 15. On whether or not homosexuality is “freely chosen,” Richard Hays argues, “Paul’s condemnation of homosexual activity does not rest upon an assumption that it is freely chosen; indeed, it is precisely characteristic of Paul to regard ‘sin’ as a condition of human existence, a condition which robs us of free volition and drives us to disobedient actions which, though involuntary, are nonetheless culpable. . . . The gulf is wide between Paul’s viewpoint and the modern habit of assigning culpability only for actions assumed to be under free control of the agent” (“Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 [1986]: 209).

<sup>30</sup> The key terms in 1 Cor 6:9 are *μαλακοί*, and *ἀρσενικοῖται*, and the most widely held interpretation is the one found in BDAG: *ἀρσενικοῖται* denotes the active partner in a male homosexual encounter, and *μαλακοί*, denotes the passive partner (BDAG, s.v. *ἀρσενικοῖται*, 135; s.v. *μαλακός*, 613). Thus, this text is taken to denounce male homosexual activity in general—a view that Paul held in common with Judaism and its Scriptures (e.g., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AYB; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008], 255–58; Richard Hays, *First Corinthians* [Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1997], 97). This meaning is disputed in the literature. Dale Martin argues that *ἀρσενικοῖται* refers to exploitative sexual behavior and not homosexual acts per se (“*Arsenokoitês* and *Malakos*: Meaning and Consequences,” in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture* [ed. Robert L. Brawley; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996], 119–23). Robin Scroggs argues that *ἀρσενικοῖται* and *μαλακοί*, refer not to homosexuality in general

Hays's hermeneutical framework has special relevance for evangelicals who wish to be faithful to Scripture but who face a culture that is increasingly hostile to scriptural mores. None of us works in a vacuum, and we are all conditioned by our own experiences and context. Yet our own experiences and context should never be turned into a pretext for distorting the interpretation of Scripture. As the song writer Rich Mullins said about orthodoxy in general, we might well say of the Bible in particular: "I did not make it. It is making me."

## ***2. Is the Bible Unclear about Homosexuality?***

What about McLaren's claim that we cannot be sure what the Bible teaches about homosexuality? It is one thing to assert the Bible's authority. It is another thing to know what the authoritative Bible teaches. Some writers have gone beyond the agnosticism of McLaren. Tex Sample, for instance, declares that "the preponderance of scholarly opinion no longer supports" the church's traditional teaching on the moral status of homosexuality.<sup>31</sup> Is it true that the traditional reading has little basis in New Testament scholarship? In the last several decades, there have been a number of scholars who have tried to revise or undermine traditional interpretations of the key biblical texts in the debate. We should note, however, that the revisionists often propose interpretations that are at odds with every interpretation of these texts prior to the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> If one takes the long view, one would be hard-pressed to show that the "preponderance of scholarly opinion" now falls on the side of the revisionists. It would be helpful, therefore, to explore what New Testament scholars and commentators are now saying about New Testament texts on homosexuality. Is the issue as contested in the literature as McLaren implies? Is the New Testament really as unclear as McLaren says?

The answer to the first question is a fairly simple *yes*. New Testament scholars contest the moral status of homosexuality. The exegetical discussion has been voluminous and wide-ranging for several

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nor even to pederasty in general, but to a specific form of pederasty that involved sex-slave dealers who peddle children for brothel houses (Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983], 106–9, 118–21, 126). Such narrowing of the scope of *μαλακοί*, and *ἀρσενικοῖται* has been compellingly refuted by Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 303–39. See also James B. DeYoung, *Homosexuality: Contemporary Claims Examined in Light of the Bible and Other Ancient Literature and Law* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 178–203; Thomas R. Schreiner, "A New Testament Perspective on Homosexuality" *Them* 31:3 (2006): 70–71.

<sup>31</sup> Tex Sample, "Introduction: The Loyal Opposition," in *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality* (ed. Tex Sample and Amy E. De Long; Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 20.

<sup>32</sup> This is Andreas J. Köstenberger's judgment on revisionist interpretations of Genesis 19 in *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (2nd ed.; Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 205.

decades with arguments for both the revisionist view<sup>33</sup> and traditional view.<sup>34</sup> But the fact that it is contested does not necessarily mean that the New Testament itself is unclear (as we shall see in a moment). The three primary New Testament texts are Rom 1:26–27; 1 Cor 6:9–10; and 1 Tim 1:9–10.<sup>35</sup> The 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy texts comprise vice lists that include homosexuality among a host of other acts condemned by God. The most important of these three texts is Rom 1:26–27,<sup>36</sup> and that is the one on which we will focus.

John Boswell famously contested the traditional interpretation of Rom 1:26–27 in his 1980 book *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. He argues, “The New Testament takes no demonstrable position on homosexuality” as we know it.<sup>37</sup> He argues that Paul does not condemn all forms of homosexuality, but only those acts that are committed by people who are “naturally” heterosexual. Boswell writes, “Paul did not discuss gay *persons* but only homosexual *acts* committed by heterosexual persons.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, when Paul condemns what is *against nature*, he refers only to one’s own private sexual orientation.

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<sup>33</sup> A couple of early revisionist works that continue to exert significant influence in this discussion are Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) and John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Both of these works suggest new readings that still define the revisionist field today. Victor Paul Furnish (*The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues* [2nd ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1985]) is also an important early work claiming that Paul’s views on homosexuality can no longer be considered normative. More recent works of note include David L. Balch, ed., *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). This volume includes essays from both sides of the issue and considers work from both scientific and exegetical scholarship. While these early revisionist approaches are still prominent in recent work, so are hermeneutical discussions that relativize the normative importance of biblical texts condemning homosexuality. See, for instance, David J. Lull, “Jesus, Paul, and Homosexuals,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 34:3 (June 2007): 199–207. See also Dan O. Via’s contribution to *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (ed. Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003). On the hermeneutical question, Via argues that the Bible’s strictures against homosexuality should not be taken at face-value and that the Bible is not the ultimate norm for ethics (1–2). Another interesting revisionist work is Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), which narrates his change of heart from a traditionalist to a revisionist perspective.

<sup>34</sup> The most important recent defenses of the traditional view are Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* and James B. DeYoung, *Homosexuality: Contemporary Claims Examined in Light of the Bible and Other Ancient Literature and Law* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000). These two books work through all of the relevant biblical texts with great exegetical precision and care. A very helpful overview of the state of discussion among New Testament scholars through 1996 is Schreiner, “A New Testament Perspective on Homosexuality,” 62–75. Richard Hays’s chapter on homosexuality should not be overlooked (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* [New York: HarperOne, 1996], 379–406), nor should Stanley J. Grenz’s *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> We might also add Jude 7 to this list as it appears to indicate that homosexual sin was at least part of the basis for God’s judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19.

<sup>36</sup> Schreiner, “A New Testament Perspective on Homosexuality,” 65.

<sup>37</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 117.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.



Robin Scroggs also renders Rom 1:27 irrelevant to the homosexual question by arguing that Paul meant to condemn only exploitive homosexual acts between men and boys—also known as *pederasty*.<sup>39</sup> Thus, since Paul condemns pederasty and not homosexual relations in general, this text (and 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10) cannot be used to make an ethical judgment against what modern people mean by homosexuality. Gerald Sheppard relativizes what he calls the “homophobic”<sup>40</sup> interpretation of Rom 1:26–27 by arguing that “the Bible’s own normative expression of intimate sexual love . . . *does* begin to suggest . . . some norms and rules in support of loving same-sex relationships.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the secondary matters of Scripture (like Paul’s view of homosexuality) must give way to the primary emphases of biblical theology (like justification by faith).<sup>42</sup> In effect, therefore, Paul’s manifest concern for justice trumps his hang-ups about homosexuality. Scholars like Victor Paul Furnish and Margaret Davies make no pretense to honor the authority of Scripture as Sheppard does. Rather, their perspective resembles Luke Timothy Johnson’s mentioned above. They think that what we now know about homosexuality simply trumps Paul’s condemnation of it.<sup>43</sup>

All of these proposals fail to convince.<sup>44</sup> Boswell fails because he misunderstands what Paul means by *nature*. For Paul, nature (φύσις word group) is not a reference to one’s own private sexual orientation. Nature refers to the creational purposes of God in the primeval event of making male and female.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 126.

<sup>40</sup> Gerald T. Sheppard, “The Use of Scripture with the Christian Ethical Debate Concerning Same-Sex Oriented Persons,” *USQR* 40 (1985): 18, 31.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>43</sup> Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul*, 79–80; Margaret Davies, “New Testament Ethics and Ours: Homosexuality and Sexuality in Romans 1:26–27,” *BibInt* 3 (1995): 318. Davies writes, “Pauline condemnation of homosexual practice is therefore to be understood as an anomalous emotional blindspot in an otherwise radical transformation of tradition” (318).

<sup>44</sup> In this summary and critique, I am following Schreiner, “A New Testament Perspective on Homosexuality,” 65–71.

<sup>45</sup> The meaning of the φύσις word group in Rom 1:26–27 has been fiercely contested—one side arguing that φύσις denotes *God’s created order*, the other that it refers to the *personal qualities of an individual* (i.e., “orientation”). Boswell’s watershed book famously argued that φύσις refers not to God’s creational order, but to an individual’s own orientation: “Nature’ in Romans 1:26, then, should be understood as the personal nature of the pagans in question” (*Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 111). Thus, according to Boswell, Paul was condemning individuals who had a heterosexual orientation but who went against “nature” to engage in homosexual acts. In Boswell’s reading of Paul, not all homosexual acts are against “nature,” thus defined. Boswell writes, “It cannot be inferred from this that Paul considered mere homoerotic attraction or practice morally reprehensible, since the passage strongly implies that he was not discussing persons who were by inclination gay and since he carefully observed, in regard to both the women and the men, that they changed or abandoned the ‘natural’ use to engage in homosexual activities” (112–13). Boswell’s argument was roundly refuted by Richard Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1,” *JRE* 14 (1986): 184–215. Hays shows that Boswell’s exegesis is “seriously flawed” (184), anachronistic (200), and eisegetical (201). Hays writes, “His proposal falls apart completely *as exegesis of Paul* when we recognize that the whole conception of ‘sexual orientation’ is an anachronism when applied to this text. The idea that some individuals have an inherent disposition towards same-sex erotic attraction and are therefore constitutionally ‘gay’ is a modern idea of which there is no trace either in the NT or in any other Jewish or Christian writings in the ancient world” (200). “Paul identifies ‘nature’ with the created order” (194). Hays says that this meaning is so clear that “One is left wondering what an ancient writer could possibly have said to avoid being coopted in the service of Boswell’s hypothesis” (202). See also Hays,

To depart from nature is to depart from the heterosexual norm established in Gen 1–2.<sup>46</sup> Scroggs’s pederasty proposal fails because there is not one scintilla of evidence in the text that Paul is talking about relationships between men and boys. Paul speaks of ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσενιν (lit., males in males) in Rom 1:27 without saying anything about young boys. Paul condemns same-sex relations between females in verse 26, but there is no evidence from antiquity that women and young girls are in view. Thus, in both verses 26 and 27, Paul is prohibiting same-sex relations in general. Sheppard, Furnish, and Davies fail because they manifestly undermine the authority of Scripture in their hermeneutical approach. Tom Schreiner correctly evaluates their approach: “This view at least has the virtue of honesty, but at the same time it removes itself from the realm of biblical and Christian ethics by surrendering to the tides of culture.”<sup>47</sup> So yes it is true that the Bible’s teaching on homosexuality is contested, but the recent revisions of the traditional view are seriously flawed. That an interpretation of a text might be contested is by no means grounds for concluding that we cannot know what that text means. N. T. Wright’s comment to this effect is apt: “What we cannot do is to sideline this passage as irrelevant to Christian ethical discourse . . . or to pretend that it means something other than what it says.”<sup>48</sup>

We should also note that revisionist interpretations have yet to win a consensus among commentators on Rom 1:26–27. The traditional understanding still holds in many if not most of the major critical commentaries.<sup>49</sup> For instance, Robert Jewett’s 2007 Romans commentary for the Hermeneia series is a massive work of scholarship. After all the decades of homosexual-friendly interpretations, Jewett nevertheless holds the line on the traditional interpretation. In fact, he has gone further than anyone I have seen to show that Paul condemns homosexual behavior generally and not narrowly only with reference to certain kinds of homosexual behavior. He does this in a rather idiosyncratic translation of verses 26–27:

For this reason, God delivered them to the desires of their hearts for passions of dishonor, for their females exchanged the natural use for the unnatural, and likewise also the males, after they abandoned the natural use with females, were inflamed with their lust for one another, *males who work up their shameful member in other males*, and receive back for their deception the recompense that is *tightness in themselves*.<sup>50</sup>

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*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 383–89. So also Markus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakhah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 130: “The context makes it plain that the appeal to ‘nature’ here (παρὰ φύσιν, v. 26) is in fact an appeal to the same created order which calls for the distinction between creature and creator.”

<sup>46</sup> The New Testament elsewhere reaffirms this creational order: Matt 19:5; Mark 10:7–8; 1 Cor 6:16; Eph 5:31.

<sup>47</sup> Schreiner, “A New Testament Perspective on Homosexuality,” 68–69.

<sup>48</sup> N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” in *NIB*, 10:435.

<sup>49</sup> E.g., C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975–79), 1:127; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1988), 64–66; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 275–76, 285–88; Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 172–81; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 113–17; Robert H. Mounce, *Romans* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 82–84; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 94–98; Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 69; Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” 10:433–35.

<sup>50</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 163 (italics mine).

Jewett's translation reveals an explicit depiction of homosexual acts, and Jewett argues that Paul sees them *all* as sinful. Jewett writes, "Paul simply follows . . . his Jewish cultural tradition by construing the entire realm of homosexual relations as evidence that divine wrath was active therein."<sup>51</sup> I am not citing Jewett as if his work is an unassailable authority on the interpretation of Romans. I am merely highlighting the fact that decades of revisionist interpretations have failed to gain a new consensus to replace the old one. Even this very recent major critical commentary emphatically enunciates the traditional view. Furthermore, Jewett comes to his conclusion without even one reference to the most important monograph defending the traditional view: Robert Gagnon's 2001 book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*.

Once again, it is true that the Bible's teaching on homosexuality is contested, but the recent revisions of the traditional view are seriously flawed. Probably the most serious error of the revisionists is their failure to see that Paul simply reflects the heterosexual ideal that he inherited from Judaism. This fundamental flaw explains in large part why there is not yet a scholarly consensus reflected in major critical commentaries. The evidence still shows that Paul understood that the OT prohibits homosexuality (Lev 18:22; 20:13). He simply carries forward into the New Covenant the sexual norm of his Jewish tradition.

### 3. Conclusion

When Jesus and Paul set out new covenant norms for marriage and sexuality, they do not appeal to polygamist kings like David or Solomon or to polygamist patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. For all the importance these Old Testament figures have in the history of redemption, Jesus and Paul do not look to any of them as the paradigm for understanding marriage and sex. Instead, Jesus and Paul look back without exception to the pre-fall monogamous union of Adam and Eve in Gen 2 as the norm of human sexuality and marriage. "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cling to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:24, author's translation; cf. Matt 19:5; Mark 10:7–8; 1 Cor 6:16; Eph 5:31).

The apostle Paul says that the great *mystery* of the Gen 2 norm of marriage (one man and one woman in covenanted union) is that God intended it all along to be a shadow of a greater reality. From the Garden of Eden forward, God intended marriage and the marriage act to enact a parable of another marriage: Christ's marriage to his church (Eph 5:31–32). Thus, marriage and sex are not defined by the culture, but by the gospel itself. Jesus loves his bride exclusively and self-sacrificially; and Jesus' bride must respect and submit to her husband. In this way, God designed marriage to portray a gospel-archetype rooted in his eternal purposes. The gospel that shapes this archetype is also the hope for humanity and the context in which human happiness reaches its fullest potential. Here is the innermost meaning of marriage and human sexuality, and faithful Christians will engage the culture with proclamation and living that bears out this truth.

Brian McLaren seriously erred in both his 2006 and 2010 remarks about homosexuality. The Bible's verdict on this question is sufficiently clear for Christians to render a verdict on the moral status of homosexuality. For this reason, Christians must never shrink back from declaring the truth of God revealed in the Bible, even if that truth runs counter to the culture. Serious Christians cannot defer judgment on the moral status of homosexuality (as McLaren suggested) for at least three reasons: (1) the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 179.

Bible's meaning is sufficiently clear in all the relevant passages; (2) faithful Christian discipleship needs clear norms for human sexuality; and (3) Christian witness to the lost world requires an accounting for human sexuality.

Revisionists and progressives often present us with a false choice concerning the church's ministry to homosexuals. Christians can either walk the path of homophobia and hatred, or they can surrender their ancient beliefs to accommodate the normalization of homosexual practice.<sup>52</sup> But this is an unnecessary dilemma. There is another way. Christians and churches can love and minister to homosexuals while still holding fast to biblical norms for human sexuality. If McLaren's "pastoral response" is as unworkable as I have argued here, then Bible-believing Christians must construct a framework for ministry to people struggling with homosexual sin.

In 1992, John Piper drafted a statement for Bethlehem Baptist Church that provides such a framework. The statement outlines six points of "Beliefs about Homosexual Behavior and Ministering to Homosexual Persons."<sup>53</sup> I commend this statement as a model starting-point for any church wishing to reach homosexuals with the gospel:

1. We believe that heterosexuality is God's revealed will for humankind and that, since God is loving, a chaste and faithful expression of this orientation (whether in singleness or in marriage) is the ideal to which God calls all people.

2. We believe that a homosexual orientation is a result of the fall of humanity into a sinful condition that pervades every person. Whatever biological or familial roots of homosexuality may be discovered, we do not believe that these would sanction or excuse homosexual behavior, though they would deepen our compassion and patience for those who are struggling to be free from sexual temptations.

3. We believe there is hope for the person with a homosexual orientation and that Jesus Christ offers a healing alternative in which the power of sin is broken and the person is freed to know and experience his or her true identity in Christ and in the fellowship of his Church.

4. We believe that this freedom is attained through a process which includes recognizing homosexual behavior as sin, renouncing the practice of homosexual behavior, rediscovering healthy, non-erotic friendships with people of the same sex, embracing a moral sexual lifestyle, and in the age to come, rising from the dead with a new body free from every sinful impulse. This process parallels the similar process of sanctification needed in dealing with heterosexual temptations as well. We believe that this freedom comes through faith in Jesus Christ, by the power of his Spirit.

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<sup>52</sup> Baptist historian Bill Leonard offers a similar false choice in his reflections on the decline of the Southern Baptist Convention. Leonard says that the SBC is at a fork in the road. In one direction are Mennonites, who separate themselves from the larger culture to ensure their own doctrinal purity, and in the other direction is greater popularity but a dilution of the doctrine (Jeffrey Weiss, "The Southern Baptist Convention is Yesterday's News," *PoliticsDaily.com*, June 29, 2010, <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2010/06/29/the-southern-baptist-convention-is-yesterdays-news/>).

<sup>53</sup> John Piper, "Bethlehem's Position on Homosexuality," August 6, 2003, [http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/TopicIndex/80\\_Homosexuality/1237\\_Bethlehems\\_Position\\_on\\_Homosexuality/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/TopicIndex/80_Homosexuality/1237_Bethlehems_Position_on_Homosexuality/).



5. We believe that all persons have been created in the image of God and should be accorded human dignity. We believe therefore that hateful, fearful, unconcerned harassment of persons with a homosexual orientation should be repudiated. We believe that respect for persons with a homosexual orientation involves honest, reasoned, nonviolent sharing of facts concerning the immorality and liability of homosexual behavior. On the other hand, endorsing behavior which the Bible disapproves endangers persons and dishonors God.

6. We believe that Christian churches should reach out in love and truth to minister to people touched by homosexuality, and that those who contend Biblically against their own sexual temptation should be patiently assisted in their battle, not ostracized or disdained. However, the more prominent a leadership role or modeling role a person holds in a church or institution of the Conference, the higher will be the expectations for God's ideal of sexual obedience and wholeness. We affirm that both heterosexual and homosexual persons should find help in the church to engage in the Biblical battle against all improper sexual thoughts and behaviors.

Piper's statement combines the Bible's countercultural teaching with a compassionate call for gospel ministry to homosexual sinners. It is this kind of vision that the churches need to adopt if they are to bring the gospel to bear upon every sinner in need of God's grace in Christ. McLaren's distortion of the Bible's ethic renders this kind of ministry impossible, but here is a concrete example of a better way.<sup>54</sup>

Where these kinds of principles define the church's ministry and mission, there is hope for even the most wayward of sinners. The hope of the gospel is for any sinner who will have it, and that includes homosexual sinners. That is why the apostle Paul was able to say to the homosexual sinners in Corinth, "But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11). In 1 Tim 1:9–10, Paul gives a list of the various kinds of sinners that one finds in the world: murderers, immoral men, homosexuals, kidnappers, liars and perjurers. Among these, Paul names himself as the worst of the lot because he was a blasphemer, persecutor, and a violent aggressor when God saved him (v. 13). In verse 14, Paul says that he found love when by the mercy of God he came to Christ. If God's love applies to Paul, the chief of sinners, it certainly applies to other sinners as well—including the homosexual sinners of verse 10. This is the message that God has given the church to proclaim, and it is the message that the world desperately needs to hear.

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<sup>54</sup> Piper says that the statement was drafted "with the help of Joe Hallet, who came out of the homosexual life by the power of Christ and lived faithfully with AIDS, and eventually with his wife, until his death in 1997" ("Bethlehem's Position on Homosexuality").