

"In the Shadow of Sodom: Does the Bible Really Say What We Thought About Homosexuality?"

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

Continuing Gay Agitation

It was front-page news in the *Orange County Register* in March, 1991: "Gay ordination issue jolts Protestants." Once again mainline denominations were entering into debate and tempting division in their ranks over the question of ordaining admitted, practicing homosexuals to ministerial office within the church. Since the mid-seventies there have been repeated efforts and campaigns within a variety of denominations to shift to such a policy. (Attention to this bizarre development has sometimes been preempted by the equally clamorous and heterodox, but apparently more successful, campaign to approve the ordination of women to ministerial office in many denominations.)

The rumblings were within the Episcopal Church and Presbyterian Church (USA), which together number over 5.5 million members. Study committees within both denominations had recommended that active homosexuals should be admitted to the ministry of God's word. Most recently, in October, 1993, a task force of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (5.2 million members) published a study on sexuality in which the authors claim that the Bible supports homosexual unions which represent a loving, binding commitment.

This is startling, of course, because it is precisely God's word to which appeal traditionally has been made to bar unrepentant homosexuals from being ordained. Indeed, throughout church history Christian denominations have appealed to the word of God as a basis for a policy quite contrary to the one sought today -- namely, the policy of censoring and *excommunicating* convicted homosexuals.[\[2\]](#)

Such an attitude and practice did not arise from "homophobia" (fear of homosexuals), but rather from "the fear of the Lord" which is the beginning of all wisdom (Proverbs 1:7). If there is one trait which is conspicuously missing among modern churchmen, however, it is precisely this fear of the Lord. One thinks of Paul's concluding assessment of the moral debauchery of both Jews and Greeks: "there is no fear of God before their eyes" (Romans 3:18, cf. Psalm 36:1). Having laid aside the unchallengeable authority of God's inspired word in the Bible (liberalism) or making the authority of its fallible statements rest on a subjective fulcrum (neo-orthodoxy), modern theologians do not submit their minds and reasoning to Jesus Christ, in whom are deposited all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3). They have allowed themselves to be "robbed" by the worldly philosophical assumptions and traditions of men (v. 8).

It is little wonder, then, that they now contemplate ordaining to ministerial service those whom Christ in His word has declared abominable. Naturally enough, since they are by profession men who handle the word of God, such unorthodox theologians cannot simply turn away from the Bible, but are forced to the desperate maneuver of claiming that their opinion on homosexuality is somehow "responsive to the Scriptures" -- but just as importantly, responsive to history and tradition too! There is little honor left today for the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, something a Luther or Calvin would have died for. Much less is there to be found among modern theologians an honest grammatico-historical understanding of the Scriptures themselves. This is not to say, though, that the modern supporters of homosexual ordination concede that they have repudiated the Bible.

Double Perversity

Everyone has a moral point of view in terms of which he or she evaluates the behavior and attitudes of people. The application of that ethical perspective will eventually entail an appeal to some criterion of right and wrong. We can no more come to an ethical judgment apart from some *standard* of evaluation than we could measure the size of a package without a yardstick. A fundamental question in ethics, then, has to do with what the standard of morality should be.[\[3\]](#)

In our present-day culture there is an increasing number of people who advocate the notion that homosexual practices are morally acceptable. Minimally, they are to be tolerated as an "alternative lifestyle" which can be as ethically good or bad as the heterosexual lifestyle. Maximally, they are to be morally affirmed and promoted as preferable to heterosexuality. Those who have chosen this standpoint simultaneously pronounce their own moral condemnation on people who would judge homosexual practices to be immoral and disreputable -- especially those who claim the warrant of divine revelation for that ethical judgment. Two moral perspectives are obviously in conflict here, coming as they do to divergent conclusions about the acceptability of homosexuality.

It would be all too easy for us to assume, then, that those who condone homosexuality and those who condemn it have completely different standards of ethics. It seems that professing Christians take the Bible as their moral standard for censuring homosexuality as abominable, while those who disagree with this viewpoint would repudiate the Bible as their moral authority. This does not always turn out to be the case, however. Surprisingly, there are a group of inventive scholars and writers who would have us believe that even if we take the Bible as our standard of ethics, the Bible does *not* support a negative attitude toward homosexuality.

Those who condone homosexuality would rather not be seen in the harsh light of criticizing and rejecting Biblical revelation. They do not want it said that, by the standard of divine revelation, their *opinion* of homosexuality stands condemned by God, just as surely as homosexuality itself stands condemned in the word of God. Therefore, they are compelled to argue that Scripture does not, after all, denounce homosexuality as so many Christians through history have thought. They argue that Christians who detract from the moral acceptability of homosexuality have actually misunderstood the Biblical witness -- indeed, that the Biblical exhortations about love and forbearance actually condemn the Bible-thumpers who reproach homosexuals! The conflict, they would have us believe, is not over the proper standard of ethics at all. They suggest that we can readily accept the Bible as our moral standard and *not* come to the conclusion that God finds homosexuality morally abominable.[\[4\]](#)

This will seem surprising to the ordinary student of Scripture, to be sure. But perhaps it should not be thought of as too surprising. Notice that the Apostle Paul, in excoriating Roman civilization, pronounced divine disapprobation against not only those who practice such inappropriate behavior as homosexuality, *but also* against those who "consent with them" that practice it (Romans 1:32). Individuals can not only be caught in the sin of sexual perversion, they can just as much be caught in the sin of *perverse thinking about* this sexual perversion. Paul describes them as people who "refused to retain God in their knowledge"; and accordingly, "God gave them up to a reprobate mind" (v. 28). Suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (v. 18), they became utterly "futile in their reasoning, and their senseless heart was darkened" (v. 21). In this paper we will find that we must

humbly draw the same conclusion as did Paul himself when people take the alarming position that God's revelation does not really condemn homosexuality.

Overview of the Biblical Witness

Let us pause to take a look at what the Bible would appear to say about homosexuality on an initial reading. We can begin with the most explicit and elaborated condemnation of homosexuality in the New Testament, the words of Paul in Romans 1:24-28, 32.

In verses 18-23 of Romans 1, Paul has indicted the ungodliness of the unbelieving world which, knowing God, would not glorify Him as God. God has made Himself so clearly known through the created world that unbelievers are without excuse for exchanging the glory of God for idolatry. In doing such a thing they suppress the truth by means of unrighteousness and become fools in their reasoning, despite making profession of being wise.

Paul then three times indicates about the unbelieving world that God has "given them up." The world in rebellion against God has been judicially abandoned by God -- given over to unclean desires (v. 24), given over to dishonoring passions (v. 26), and given over to a reprobate mind to do things which are not appropriate (v. 28). This is taken by Paul to be the epitome of a culture which exchanges the truth of God for a lie, worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator (v. 25).

And what is the leading example used by Paul for the unclean, vile, and morally inappropriate behavior practiced by those who refuse to worship the Creator? "Their females exchanged the natural use for what is against nature; likewise also the males, leaving the natural use of the female, burned in their desire for one another, men among men working shamefulness..." (vv. 26-27). Paul conceptually ties together in one moral diatribe those who "change" the incorruptible glory of God to corruptible icons (v. 23) -- who "exchange" the truth of God for a lie (v. 25) -- with those who "exchange" heterosexual relations for homosexual ones (v. 26), as the verbal play on words in Greek indicates (*allaxan, metallaxan*).

Paul summarizes and reiterates the three-fold condemnation of the Old Testament witness against homosexuality. He charges that (1) homosexuality is condemned from nature (vv. 26-27), men and women both leaving "the natural use" of sex and pursuing shameful lusts for members of their same sex. This takes us back to the account of creation in Genesis 1:27-28 and 2:18-25. When God created the human race He made man as His image, creating man specifically as male and female (Genesis 1:27). The male's desire for an appropriate partner was satisfied with the creation, not simply of another human being, but of the female in particular (Genesis 2:18-23). In that context God ordained the natural -- that which is according to the creational design -- union of male and female in marriage ("becoming one flesh," v. 24). This stands in stark contrast to fallen man's pursuit of erotic fellowship which is homosexual (being "one sex").

Paul also charges that (2) the condemnation of homosexuality is seen in the course of historical judgment imposed by God (Romans 1:24, 26, 28). A society which turns away from honoring God and indulges in dishonoring sexual liaisons is described as "given over" by God -- turned over as the due punishment of flagrant moral error.^[5] John Murray comments on the use of this verb: "God's displeasure is expressed in his abandonment of the persons concerned to more intensified and aggravated cultivation of the lusts of their own hearts with the result that they reap for themselves a correspondingly greater toll of retributive vengeance."^[6] Homosexuals "receive

back" the "reciprocal punishment" which was necessary and appropriate (v. 27). The testimony of Old Testament history against homosexuality was dramatically told in the account of God's destruction of Sodom in Genesis 18:20-19:11. This is a standard New Testament example of God's wrath against sinful perversion: "Even as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them in like manner, committing intense fornication and going after strange flesh, are set forth as an example of eternal fire, undergoing vengeance" (Jude 7).

Finally, in Romans 1 Paul charges that (3) homosexuality is condemned out of the law of God: "who knowing the ordinance of God that those practicing such things are worthy of death, they not only do them, but also consent with those practicing" (v. 32). Paul's theology taught that even the Gentiles show "the work of the law written on their hearts" (Romans 2:15), learning from the created order and the inward testimony of God's image the moral requirements revealed to the Jews in writing by Moses (the "oracles of God," 3:2). The testimony of the law of God was emphatic in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. God declared it an "abomination" for a man to go to bed with a man, as he does with a woman; about homosexuals who do such things the law of Moses declared "their blood is upon them" (probably an allusion to the life-depriving nature of their guilt). The law specified that those who commit such a detestable act were "surely to be put to death." Homosexual practices are presented in the holy law of God as nothing less than capital crimes. We do well here to remember the New Testament affirmation that in the law of Moses "every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward" (Hebrews 2:2). Thus Paul could readily describe homosexuals as (a) knowing the judgment of God on this matter, and as (b) doing that which is "worthy" of death according to God's ordinance^[7].

One more note about Paul's denouncing of homosexuality in Romans 1. It should be evident even to the casual reader that Paul intended to say much more than that outward homosexual practices were under the wrath and curse of God. Inward desires of the homosexual for erotic contact with people of his or her own gender are likewise censured by the Apostle. This is what a reader of the Bible would approach the text expecting, after all. When Scripture condemns some outward behavior, it likewise condemns the desire of the heart to pursue that sinful behavior -- for instance, Jesus' admonishing His hearers for lust, which is "adultery in the heart" (Matthew 5:28). Elsewhere the Lord declared that "out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications," etc. (Matthew 15:19). Similarly, Paul excoriates homosexual practices, but he extends this judgment to the inner motives and desires which conceive and bring forth such practices as well (cf. James 1:14-15). The object of his moral disapproval is not simply the "unseemly deeds" of the homosexual (v. 27). He also specifically mentions homosexuals being "inflamed with desire" for each other (v. 27) and damns them for their "impure lusts" (v. 25) and "shameful passions" (v. 26). Such vile affections are explicitly placed by Paul under the holy hatred of God.

Therefore, our reading of the Biblical testimony in Romans 1 would certainly not incline us in the direction of thinking that God takes a tolerant attitude toward homosexuality. We have seen that Paul there presents homosexuality, both in outward practice and inward desire, as the leading illustration of the reprobate condition of unbelieving culture. Paul reiterates the Old Testament perspective, finding the condemnation of homosexuality in the testimony of man's creation (cf. "nature"), in the testimony of history (e.g., Sodom), and in the testimony of the moral law ("God's ordinance"). Paul confirms the vile character of this sexual perversion and pronounces God's judgment of death upon it. As I put it in my book, *Homosexuality: A Biblical View*: "We should

soberly conclude that modern society as well as the modern church are both dangerously close to divine retribution as they continue to tolerate and approve homosexuality. 'Gay liberation' is symptomatic of a culture abandoned by God to destruction and a church provoking the Lord with abomination.[\[8\]](#)"

Missing the Obvious

So much, I believe, should be plain from the reading of God's word. It therefore at first seemed strained and silly when some writers, beginning with D. S. Bailey^[9], began to suggest that the Bible does not really carry the negative message against homosexuality which Christians have traditionally thought. The flaws in Bailey's analysis of the relevant Biblical texts were easy enough to identify, as I indicated in a college paper written on the subject in the late 1960s. But the 1960s was also the era of cultural revolution in America -- the counterculture, the drug culture, the antiwar movement, civil rights marches for racial equality, woman's liberation, the pill, the luv culture, and the sexual revolution, etc. It brought with it a tidal wave of popular opposition to establishment values and traditional mores, and churchmen (as always) were not about to miss the opportunity to ride the wave themselves.

In the push for sexual freedom and autonomy, however, there would be no stopping the revolution at the point of affirming the Playboy values of heterosexual promiscuity. When it came to sexual satisfaction, it was to be an open door for moral relativism: "different strokes for different folks." Sexual freedom and self-gratification, to be consistent, had to mean freedom to practice what had previously been thought to be moral perversion: homosexuality^[10]. If there was increasing agitation for gay pride and acceptance, not to mention campaigns for establishing homosexuality as a "civil right," those who visibly wore the religious mantle in our culture were only too glad to step into the leadership light (if not also out of the closet). Thus the mid to late 1970s saw a rash of books appear which picked up where Bailey had left off, arguing that the Bible did not after all, upon a "corrected" reading, condemn the homosexuality which had coincidentally become culturally fashionable about that same time^[11]. Especially noteworthy was the book by John J. McNeill (a Jesuit priest), entitled *The Church and the Homosexual*^[12]. But there were plenty of others to follow: for instance *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times* by Thomas Horner^[13], or *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor? Another Christian View* by Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott^[14].

A representative example of how revisionist authors from Bailey onward have attempted to blunt the Biblical witness against homosexuality is found in the treatment given by such authors to the Biblical account of the destruction of Sodom in Genesis 19. We can turn to it for insight into the way in which Scripture is often twisted by those who approach it with a homosexual agenda in mind^[15]. read in Genesis 18 that Jehovah considered the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah to be "very grievous" (vv. 20-21), enough so that He contemplated "consuming" the place (v. 23). While two angels were sent to the region, Abraham pled successfully with God not to destroy the town of Sodom, where Abraham's nephew Lot lived, if there could be found as few as ten righteous men there (v. 32). Chapter 19 opens by telling us that the two angels arrived in Sodom at evening, where they were greeted by Lot "in the gate," who convinced them not to spend the night in the open town square but to come home to lodge with his family instead (vv. 1-3). The men of Sodom subsequently circled Lot's house and demanded that the two guests be brought out that the Sodomites might "know" them (v. 5, the Hebrew verb is *yadha*). Finally the divine response was to smite the men of the city with blindness and to destroy the city with fire and brimstone (vv. 11, 23-25).

In later Biblical references to Sodom we read that there were further sins of the city which displeased the Lord (e.g., Ezekiel 16:49-50); indeed the city is held up as "an example to those who would live godly thereafter," we read in 2 Peter 2:6 -- which is exemplified in Jerusalem being "spiritually called Sodom" (Revelation 11:8). Although a general wickedness characterized Sodom, the fact cannot be suppressed that the Sodomites' desire to "know" Lot's guests is the manifest sin set forth in Genesis 19 and the *specific* confirmation that the city was worthy of devastation (cf. 19:13 with 18:21). What was this mark of the city's degradation and rebellion against God?

Even though the Hebrew verb can be used for sexual relations (e.g., Genesis 4:1), revisionists tell us that *yadha* is not the normal word used for homosexual relations (*shakhabh*) and thus should be taken in the ordinary sense of knowing something - to "get acquainted with." The theory runs that, as a resident alien in Sodom, Lot was responsible for introducing any guests to the townsmen and letting the established citizens examine their credentials. That is why the Sodomites asked to "know" Lot's visitors; they simply wished to get acquainted with them. In the Semitic mind, a stranger had a right to hospitable reception, however, and this was not given to Lot's guests by the Sodomites. The sin of Sodom is thereby reinterpreted as inhospitality to the visitors (cf. Luke 10:10-13). That is, we are to believe that for a breach of social courtesy the Lord God reduced the city to ash. Such a disparity between the offense and its requital is rather hard to believe from the outset, but the revisionist interpretation of the story will not withstand serious literary scrutiny anyway.

In the first place Lot was not simply a resident alien in the city of Sodom. He was a prominent social figure to be described as "sitting in the gate" -- an idiom for commercial or judicial leadership. Lot knew well enough the moral character of the city, so much so that he was alarmed at the prospect of the visitors spending the night in a public place. He strongly urged them to accept accommodations in his home. When all the men of the city later came and surrounded his house, Lot did not respond to their request as though it were a routine civil procedure of inspecting credentials. (Did it really require "both young and old, all the people from every quarter" [v. 4] to do the equivalent of a simple passport check?) To the contrary, Lot defensively shut the door of his home behind him and characterized the requested "knowing" as a great *wickedness* (vv. 6-7). It calls for a strange line of reasoning to see (1) how a simple desire for townsmen to get acquainted is a breach of hospitality, (2) how it would be seen as seriously wicked in light of city customs known by Lot, and (3) why it would be so vile as to warrant dramatic divine punishment.

Moreover, given the revisionist interpretation, what would explain Lot's offer to substitute his daughters (v. 8) as those who the men of the city might come to "know"? The citizens would surely already be acquainted with them, and their appearance would do nothing to prevent the breach of hospitality to Lot's guests. Revisionists suggest that Lot's offer of his daughters was a sexual bribe, intended to divert the attention of the citizens from accepted town protocol regarding visitors. This is psychologically incredible. Why would Lot object to introducing his guests to the men of the city in the first place? Why would he as a father go so far as to propose the violation of his daughters in response to what was merely an impolite request? Furthermore, notice that the revisionist approach requires us to interpret Lot's offer to bring out his daughters "who have not *known* man" as precisely a *sexual* bribe, taking the Hebrew word *yadha* as a reference to sexual intercourse in v. 8. In that case, though, the same interpretation should be given to the verb in the

immediate context of v. 5 as well -- which is precisely what the revisionists were seeking to avoid. It is plain enough on a consistent reading of the passage that the men of Sodom were seeking sexual relations with Lot's guests, "to know them."

Lot clearly understood the homosexual designs of his wicked neighbors and made his own (unrighteous but contextually appropriate) counteroffer to let the men of the city do as they wished with his daughters, who had not yet "known" (had sexual relations) with men^[16]. There is no indication in the Genesis 19 account of any murderous design on the part of the Sodomites, nor is there evidence that what they had in mind was homosexual rape (as though anticipating resistance from Lot's guests). Revisionists who import connotations of violence into the account are simply reading into the text what they wish later to find. We simply cannot avoid the obvious conclusion that God devastated the cities of the plain with a catastrophe because of the homosexuality of the Sodomites. The suggestions of revisionists are desperate attempts to explain the Lord's anger toward the Sodomites. It is pure, ungrounded speculation to hold that they were punished for a breach of etiquette, or for desiring to rape and/or murder the guests, or for an idolatrous fertility rite (of which homosexuality was a part), or even for an attempted transgression of the bounds between men and angels. There is not the slightest *textual* hint that the men of Sodom recognized the supernatural character of Lot's guests^[17].

2 Peter 2:6-8 confirms that Sodom was utterly destroyed because it was a city full of homosexuals who practiced their impious, sensual debauchery day after day. Unlike many Christians in our secularized age, Lot was continually shocked and repulsed ("vexed, tormented") by the "lawless" deeds of the Sodomites -- a reference to the fact that the Sodomites were violating the commandment of God. Even though Sodom was not the elect people of God like the Jews and had not received a written revelation of God's law, they were responsible to the same moral stricture as found in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. They violated the "law" deep within their heart (Romans 2:14-15) which informed them that those who transgress such things as homosexuality are "worthy of death" (Romans 1:32).

God's word is its own best interpreter. Not only does 2 Peter 2:6-8 make plain how we should understand the sin of the Sodomites in Genesis 19, so does the reference to Sodom in Jude verse 7. The Sodomites were condemned, Jude teaches, for violating God's creation order regarding sexuality (cf. "against nature" in Romans 1:26). It is precisely the unnaturalness of the vice practiced by the Sodomites that Jude stresses as the reason for the extreme manifestation of divine wrath. The Sodomites are described as "committing fornication and going after strange [different] flesh." The Greek verb, *ekporneuein*, is intensive, denoting a form of extravagant sexual immorality. The participle, *apelthousai*, adds further intensification and brings with it the sense of utter abandonment to impurity. The object of this extreme form of fornication is said to be "different flesh" (*sarkos heteras*) -- different from the norm established by God at creation, being of the same gender rather than of the opposite gender. It was this "different" kind of sexual relations for which Sodom was placed under the terrible vengeance of God.

The revisionist approach to Scripture fostered by Bailey and others will simply not withstand serious cross-examination based upon the text of Scripture itself.

Recent Revisionism

Following the spate of books in the late 1970s which basically adopted the general approach of D. S. Bailey to the Biblical accounts which were traditionally taken as condemning homosexuality, perhaps the most well-researched and ingeniously argued revisionist text on the subject has been John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*[18]. It opened to rave reviews and has been reprinted a number of times. Boswell is an intelligent scholar who understands the complexities of historiographical reasoning, ancient languages, and literary analysis; his creativity in reading "between the lines" for a historical explanation of what has been written (or texts which have been altered) is noteworthy, reflecting wide awareness of the various (and often conflicting) ways in which historians and exegetes can approach and interpret their data. His book is the source of fascinating notions and interesting historical evidence pertaining to homosexual tolerance through Western history[19].

Boswell sets out to rebut "the common idea that religious belief -- Christian or other -- has been the *cause* of intolerance in regard to gay people." He tries to demonstrate that religious precepts have simply been used "as justification for personal animosity or prejudice," given the notorious way in which "Biblical strictures have been employed with great selectivity by all Christian states.[20]" For all we know, there could well be a measure of truth in his *psychologizing* of some past (or present) Christians, just as Boswell undoubtedly offers helpful insights into the facts and factors pertaining to the *history* of the treatment of homosexuals. However, in terms of our Christian *ethical perspective*, such things are not fundamental or pertinent. We believe that the revealed word of God is our ultimate, infallible, and sufficient standard of moral practice and reflection[21]. Where professing Christians or the history of the church have fallen short of teaching or obeying the standard of Scripture consistently, they need to be corrected and called to a more faithful adherence to this divine standard of morality. Defections from it by the followers of Christ are logically *irrelevant* to the theological point that Scripture alone should function as our moral norm. As always, we must beware of falling into the "naturalistic fallacy": arguing from what is the case (descriptively) to what ought to be the case (prescriptively).

In this context our only concern with Boswell's book is his treatment of the Scriptures themselves. He makes the amazing claim that "it is, moreover, quite clear that nothing in the Bible would have categorically precluded homosexual relations among early Christians[22]" -- thus leaving the door open to his pet theory that fear or other factors are necessary to explain Christian persecution of homosexuals in Western history. Biblical strictures would not explain the Christian's condemnation of homosexuals because, on Boswell's hypothesis, the Bible does not proscribe homosexuality in the first place -- at least, not when "correctly" interpreted. He proceeds then to supplement (with non-decisive considerations) and fall into line with Bailey in explaining away the interpretation of the story of Sodom as a condemnation of homosexuality[23], seeing it rather as God's censure upon inhospitality, which we have refuted already.

In turning to the explicit condemnations of homosexual practices in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Boswell attempts to contextualize the passages into a ritualistic concern to avoid idolatry and maintain symbols of Jewish distinctiveness from the Gentile world. Moreover, he reads the New Testament (incorrectly) as rejecting the binding authority of the Mosaic law, in which case it would

evidence arbitrary selectivity for Christians to appeal to Leviticus against homosexual practices[24].

In books written about the continuing normativity of the Mosaic moral instruction in the New Testament[25], I have observed that Jesus Himself laid down the general presumption which Christians are to have about the Mosaic law: "Do not think that I have come to abrogate the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abrogate, but to fulfill. For truly I say unto you, until heaven and earth pass away, until everything has happened, not one jot or one tittle of the law shall pass away. Therefore, whoever shall break one of these least commandments shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:17-19). It is true that the Lawgiver Himself elsewhere exercises the prerogative to alter or set aside details of the Mosaic economy, but Jesus makes it crystal clear that *we* have no authority and may not do so; rather, we must operate on the assumption of continuing validity for the Mosaic commandments, except where the New Testament teaches us otherwise. Those elements of Leviticus which Boswell notes are not followed by New Testament Christians are not followed today precisely because we believe we have *divine warrant* for laying them aside -- otherwise they would continue to be morally obligatory (cf. Deuteronomy 4:2). God does not, after all, have a double standard of morality. Paul looked upon "every scripture" of the Old Testament as profitable for "instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16), and James condemned the breaking of even one point of the law (James 2:10). Jesus' own affirmation was that man should live "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

Christians who appeal to Leviticus to censure homosexuality, but do not follow Leviticus on other matters today, are free from the charge of selectivity, therefore. By living according to *every* word from God's mouth, we lay aside those provisions of Leviticus which Scripture itself later teaches us have been fulfilled by Christ for us (e.g., the temple and sacrificial services, Hebrews 9-10) or modified in the New Covenant (e.g., the dietary laws, Acts 10). But we continue to live by those provisions which the Lawgiver has not Himself altered or rescinded. Boswell's contextualizing considerations about the anti-homosexual provisions in Leviticus are overstated and unpersuasive. It is evident from the passage spanning Leviticus 18-20 that the Lawgiver was addressing far more than connections with ritual idolatry or matters which distinguished the Jews from the Gentiles. Indeed, the passage actually contains the second most important command of Christian ethics, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18; cf. Matthew 22:39). The commandments of this passage do aim to set apart the Jews from the Gentiles, to be sure (e.g., 18:3-4, 24-30), but to set them apart not only by means of ritual ordinances (e.g., 19:21-22, trespass offerings) or pedagogical symbols (e.g., 19:19, against certain kinds of mingling), but *also* in terms of their *moral behavior*. Thus incest is forbidden -- such behavior as Paul tells us "is not even named among the Gentiles" (18:6ff.; cf. 1 Corinthians 5:1). The Leviticus passage speaks of some matters which are clearly moral, not merely ritual, in character: such as compassion for the poor and handicapped, honesty in our words and finances, not carrying grudges or speaking gossip (19:9-18), prohibiting prostitution, instilling honor for the elderly, being fair to sojourners, and using just standards of measurement (19:29-37). The same combination of laws pertaining to rituals, to distinguishing Jews from Gentiles, and to moral matters (e.g., cursing parents, adultery, bestiality) is found in Leviticus 20. Boswell simply rides roughshod over the text in his attempt to reduce its teaching all to one kind of thing, and thus his conclusion that homosexuality is condemned in Leviticus as ritual impurity (rather than as something intrinsically wrong) is a hasty and unsupported generalization.

Boswell is equally inaccurate when he claims that the Hebrew word which explains the prohibition of homosexuality in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 (*toevah*) pertains to ceremonial uncleanness, ethnic contamination and Gentile idolatry, rather than to something intrinsically evil. The word simply means "repugnant, abhorred, disgusting" and is used in this basic sense even for things detested by human beings (e.g., Genesis 43:32; 46:34; 1 Chronicles 21:6; Psalm 88:8; Proverbs 8:7 and esp. 29:27) and by God (e.g., Amos 6:8). When used in connection with God's moral disapprobation, the word often pertains to idolatry and ritual uncleanness, but it is by no means a technical word narrowed to such denotations. In the Old Testament we read that Jehovah finds any number of moral transgressions to be *toevah*: double-standards in measurement (Deuteronomy 25:16), bloodthirstiness and deceit (Psalm 5:6), the general ungodliness of atheists (Psalm 14:1), wickedness committed by kings (Proverbs 16:12), adultery (Ezekiel 33:26), etc. Once again, then, Boswell's effort to reduce the Biblical reproach on homosexuality -- that it is "repugnant" in God's sight -- to a matter of ritual uncleanness proves to be a case of arbitrarily reading *into* the text what he went there to find[26]. It is linguistically over-refined and unjustified.

Boswell alludes to "intense love relations between persons of the same gender" in the Old Testament, "sometimes with distinctly erotic overtones." He wisely refrains, though, from attempting to press any conclusions from such subjectively assessed "overtones.[27]"

When Boswell turns to the Pauline literature, he aims to show that Paul "never suggested that there was any historical or legal reason to oppose homosexual behavior,[28]" but his discussion fails to deflect the force of the obvious counter-evidence in Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, and 1 Timothy 1:8-10. In the latter two texts Paul asserts that the law of God was given to restrain the evil behavior of men, including the practice of homosexuality -- unrighteous behavior for which people are excluded from inheriting the kingdom of God. This would seem to be a rather straightforward moral condemnation of homosexuality.

Boswell's only defense is to maintain that the Greek words involved *need* not refer to homosexuality specifically. *Malakos* (1 Corinthians 6:9) is a broad term for someone who is "unrestrained, wanton," whereas *arsenokoitai* (1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10) is a narrow term for a "male prostitute," claims Boswell. In the first case, the fact that *malakos* is not "necessarily" a reference to homosexuality is irrelevant to whether in actual fact it was used that way in the specific text in question. Authorities in Greek linguistics (e.g., Moulton and Milligan) disagree with Boswell's claim that the term is never used in other Greek literature to designate homosexuals. In the case of *arsenokoitai*, Boswell has plainly narrowed its denotation without warrant. Etymologically the term is a compound meaning broadly to go to "bed" (coitus) with a "male" -- the analogy to the Old Testament expression to "lie with a man" (Leviticus 18:22). This points to homosexual relations in general, not more specifically to receiving payment for engaging in such, or for having multiple partners even.

Regarding Paul's condemnatory words in Romans 1:26-27, Boswell claims Paul was not referring to homosexual persons (those whose own inclination is sexually inverted) but rather "homosexual acts committed by heterosexual persons" -- those who pervert their own sexual inclination. We have already seen above that Paul was certainly reprimanding more than actions in this passage; he likewise censured the inward desires which lead to such outward behavior. Moreover, as to the existence of Boswell's supposed "homosexual persons" (people inwardly and always inclined to

homosexuality), the point Paul made in contradistinction was precisely that no such class of human beings exists -- that those who engage in homosexual desires and practices do so "against nature." In this context Paul does not mean these things are contrary to the person's own inward nature, but contrary to "the natural *function*" (v. 26). Boswell again oversteps the linguistic evidence when he contends that in Paul's writings the term "nature" is always understood as *someone's* nature, not nature in abstract. This would make no sense of Paul's statement that "nature itself" teaches that it is shameful for a man to have long hair (1 Corinthians 11:14). By "nature" or "natural" Paul refers to the original created order and/or its present condition and operation. This accounts for the way in which unbelievers are said to do the works of the law "by nature" (Romans 2:14), even though the "natural man" receives not the things of God's Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14); unbelievers are both created (inherently knowing God and His law) and yet fallen (inwardly resisting the revelation of God). Things which are done "contrary to nature" are thus not, by that fact *alone*, necessarily evil (e.g., God's activity in Romans 11:24). Only context can determine. In Romans, Paul presents the created order as a conduit for knowing God's personal character and the universal divine will for human behavior (1:18-25; 2:14-15).

People are no more born constitutional homosexuals than they are born constitutional adulterers or thieves. *Every* homosexual has turned away from and thus *perverted* God's creational design ("nature") for sexuality, whether self-consciously or not^[29]. The notions and metaphorical vocabulary were readily available to the Apostle Paul by which he could have referred to an inner propensity toward homosexuality, if it had been his intention to exclude such from the condemnation uttered in Romans 1; but his denunciation of homosexuality was, by contrast, categorical or without qualification.

Conclusion

We see in conclusion, therefore, that Boswell's mental gymnastics with the Old and New Testament witness have been ineffective in dimming the Biblical censure and condemnation of homosexuality. Boswell wishes to say that "the New Testament takes no demonstrable position on homosexuality," in which case "the source of antigay feelings among Christians must be sought elsewhere.[\[30\]](#)"

In point of fact, however, Christians *can* properly adduce, and through the years have rightly appealed to, the text of the Scriptures as the *moral standard* which warrants strong and principled disapproval of homosexual practices and feelings. Does the Bible really say what we had previously thought it did about homosexuality? Upon re-examination and interaction with contrary thinking, we are justified in answering that indeed it does. It is one thing for those who encourage or tolerate homosexuality to take their own personal stand against Biblical teaching; it altogether another thing for them to suppress or pervert what the Biblical text actually teaches. To say that Moses and Paul condemn homosexuality and you choose to disagree with them is a precarious thing to do, of course. But at least it demonstrates greater scholarly integrity than to pretend or rationalize that you are not impugning the witness of divine revelation.

[1] Dr. Bahnsen is the Scholar-in-Residence at the Southern California Center for Christian Studies, to which you may write for a catalog of educational services, tapes, or free monthly newsletter (P. O. Box 18021, Irvine, CA 92713). He holds the M.Div. and Th.M. (social ethics) from Westminster Theological Seminary, and the Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Southern California. He has taught at Reformed and Ashland Theological Seminaries and is the author of five books, including *Homosexuality: A Biblical View* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978). This lecture was presented at a symposium sponsored by the Simon Greenleaf School of Law (Anaheim, CA) on March 30, 1991, and in slightly updated form at the Shettleston Free Presbyterian Church in Glasgow, Scotland, on October 7, 1993.

[2] For instance, nearly 350 years ago, in 1648 the Church of Scotland approved the Westminster Larger Catechism which taught that among the sins forbidden in the seventh commandment are "sodomy and all unnatural lusts" (#139). Chapter 30 of the Westminster Confession of Faith (adopted 1647 in Scotland) taught that the government of the church has authority from Christ "to shut that kingdom against the impenitent," pronouncing censures against unrepentant offenders in order to reclaim them, deter others, purging the church, vindicating Christ's honor, and "preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer His covenant, and the seals thereof [i.e., the sacraments], to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders." One prays that such a firm exhortation and warning would be heeded by contemporary Christians!

[3] Cf. Greg L. Bahnsen, *By This Standard: The Authority of God's Law Today* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985).

[4] For an example, hear my radio dialog with Paul Johnson, a homosexual professing to be an evangelical Christian, on radio station KBRT in southern California, on November 16, 1992 (tapes #1150-1151, available from Covenant Tape Ministry, 24198 Ash Court, Auburn, CA 95602).

[5] The verb used by Paul in this Romans passage (*paradidomi*) is also the one he chose to use in 1 Corinthians 5:5 for the church's excommunication of an incestuous fornicator, "handing him over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh." He uses it in the same fashion in 1 Timothy 1:20, where he says he has "handed over" Hymenaeus and Alexander "unto Satan, that they might be taught not to blaspheme." In the Septuagintal translation of the Old Testament, we read that the cities and tribes which God has devoted to destruction are "handed over" to Israel in war (e.g., Deuteronomy 7:2, 23, 24, LXX). The verb clearly could be meant, among its many uses, in an active judgmental sense.

[6] *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), pp. 44-45.

[7] Romans 1:28 says that "they" -- the homosexuals mentioned in the preceding two verses -- refused to have God in their knowledge and were given up to a reprobate mind to do inappropriate things, "being filled with" all unrighteousness (v. 29). The many expressions of ungodliness listed in verses 29-31 are the kinds of transgressions of God's law which are concomitant with homosexual behavior and culture. These vices characterize a society in which homosexuality is practiced and tolerated. When Paul reaches verse 32, he speaks of them "who knowing the

ordinance of God." The relative pronoun "who" (*hoitenes*) refers back to those "filled with all unrighteousness" (v. 29) -- namely, the homosexuals (vv. 26-28).

[8] Bahnsen, *Homosexuality*, p. 61.

[9] D. S. Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1955). Bailey's views were popularized and extended further a decade later by R. L. Treese, *Homosexuality: A Contemporary View of the Biblical Perspective* (San Francisco: Glide Urban Center, 1966).

[10] I am still waiting for an advocate of moral relativism, philosophical autonomy and/or the sexual revolution to present a cogent case *against* a demand for "freedom" to engage in bestiality, child molestation or necrophilia. If, as the rhetoric often goes, God does not care how people achieve orgasm, then churchmen who advocate "homosexual rights" should have little hesitation in campaigning for the acceptance of those whose sexual preferences are even further afield than the "gay lifestyle."

[11] Modern theologians are nothing if not lacking in subtlety, ever willing to overlook Paul's exhortation to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, rather than conformed to the fashion of this world (Romans 12:1-2). A truly creative and courageous approach to theological ethics, we should believe, might rather lead religious leaders to take a stand against the tide of modern relativism and defection from God's holy law.

[12] Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, Inc., 1976. In 1974 the Roman See ordered McNeill to stop writing and lecturing on homosexuality until his views could be investigated. The book received the "Imprimi Potest" (permission to publish) of Eamon G. Taylor, the Provincial for New York Province, Society of Jesus, in 1976.

[13] Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978.

[14] San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978.

[15] This discussion follows the treatment given to the account in my book, *Homosexuality: A Biblical View*, pp. 31-35.

[16] In the similar story of Judges 19:16ff., the townsmen of Gibeah surrounded the house of a host and demanded to "know" the male guest inside. This was deemed a wicked request, and the counterproposal was made to bring out the guest's concubine instead -- who was then raped until morning and left dead. It is clear here that the townsmen were interested in sexual relations ("know" in that sense), originally with the male guest. Like the Sodomites they were homosexual (actually, bisexual) in orientation.

[17] Some revisionists appeal to Jude 7, admitting the reference to unnatural sexual relations there, but taking the "different flesh" which was the object of desire to refer to sexual relations with angels. The linguistic and theological problem is that "flesh" is not attributed to angels in Scripture (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:39).

[18] Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

[19] This is not to say that Boswell is as competent in many fields as he would want the reader to believe. Those who have paralleled his research will recognize occasional attempts to overstate the evidence: e.g., he asserts that the assumption that "homosexuality does not occur among animals other than humans... is demonstrably false" (p. 12). I point out in my book, *Homosexuality: A Biblical View* that advanced ethological studies have analyzed and disproven the notion that many animals engage in homosexual practices as do humans (p. 76); cf. Arno Karlen, *Sexuality and Homosexuality: A New View* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972).

[20] Boswell, pp. 6, 7.

[21] Deuteronomy 4:2; Isaiah 8:20; Matthew 22:29; Acts 17:11; Romans 3:4; 16:17; 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; 14:37-38; Galatians 1:8; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; etc.

[22] Boswell, p. 92.

[23] Boswell, pp. 92-99. Boswell's discussion of the word "sodomite" is more accurate and helpful than his exegesis of the Sodom passage. "Sodomite" is indeed misused in the King James Version for the Hebrew word for cult prostitutes (which were often, however, homosexual in a culture where it was men who primarily participated in the religious rites). The word does acquire through history a denotation for sins beyond homosexuality in particular, including all kinds of sexual excess or extreme immorality.

[24] Boswell, pp. 100-106. He claims, quite unbelievably, that the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 decided that pagan converts to Christian faith were not bound to any of the moral requirements of the Mosaic law (except four) -- despite the fact that the president of the Council later insisted that Christians not break even one point of it (James 2:10), and the authorized messenger of the Council repeatedly validated his moral judgments by appeal to the Mosaic law (e.g., 1 Corinthians 9:9; Ephesians 6:2).

[25] *The Authority of God's Law Today* (cited above), as well as *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, [1977] 1984).

[26] This is also true of his claim that the Septuagintal Greek word used for "abomination" in the Leviticus passages about homosexuality (*bdelugma*) pertains specifically to infringements of ritual purity and worship. In reality the Greek term is used more broadly for anything which arouses God's wrath, including non-ritualistic sins such as false balances (Proverbs 11:1, LXX), deceit (Psalm 5:6, LXX), etc.

[27] Boswell, p. 105. Other polemicists have not resisted the temptation to read such accounts in a homosexual light (e.g., Horner in *Jonathan Loved David*, chapter 2). Such attempts end up telling us more autobiographically about the interpreter than about the actual text he is interpreting. Horner incredibly strains to make 1 Samuel 20:30-32 refer to David as Jonathan's "intimate companion," then observes the close connection of the word "nakedness" in the passage (p. 32) -- even though the text is speaking about the nakedness of Jonathan's *mother*! Horner asserts that

"the implication of a homosexual relationship is clearly part of Saul's outburst." Reasoning which is so loose and fallacious hardly calls for refutation. Did David and Jonathan love each other *physically*? Horner insists that this is "proved" by 2 Samuel 1:19-27, that David made no secret of having a sexual affair with Jonathan (pp. 34, 38). To support his conclusion Horner discusses patriarchal societies and Eastern Mediterranean stories of comrade-love. He does nothing to analyze the Biblical text, which simply says Jonathan's love for David "surpassed the love of women" (2 Samuel 1:26) -- nothing about any sexual character of this "love" really (indeed, not even that the comparison is to a wife's love rather than a mother's).

[28] Boswell, pp. 106-116.

[29] See here my discussion of the act/orientation distinction in *Homosexuality: A Biblical View*, chapter 3.

[30] Boswell, p. 117.