

**A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO LGBTQ ISSUES IN OUR TIME**  
**A TALK TO THE CHICAGO CHAPTER OF THE CHRISTIAN LEGAL SOCIETY**  
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What does Scripture say about same-sex relationships and what are the contexts of its statements? How should those statements in their full contexts affect Christian thinking about the social, legal, and religious ramifications surrounding LGBTQ issues in our time? Putting the homosexuality issue in that wider context allows us to get a perspective on that issue that is much more balanced than it would otherwise be. It allows us to understand that God's strictures against homosexual relations are only one aspect of the ways he wants us to conduct ourselves, not merely with regard to sexuality, but with regard to (e.g.) idolatry, thievery, greediness, slander, etc. (see 1 Cor. 6:9-11). And it starts to give us some guidance on what we should or should not press for regarding legislation.

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I'm going to try saying things clearly enough that my claims can be true and thus give you a chance to ask for clarification and mount challenges. And I want to give you an intellectual workout that encourages you to think more about several issues.

Wise Christians don't just proof-text: they think subtly about issues. For instance, we find this prompt to subtlety in Proverbs 26, verses 4 and 5:

Don't answer the foolish arguments of fools,

or you will become as foolish as they are.

Be sure to answer the foolish arguments of fools,

or they will become wise in their own estimation. (NLT)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations will be from the English Standard Version. "NLT"

It sounds contradictory, doesn't it? Some take these verses as evidence that Scripture's claims can't all be true, for jointly asserting two contradictory claims implies that at least one of them is false.<sup>2</sup> Yet surely the compilers of Proverbs weren't stupid enough to unintentionally contradict themselves over the space of two verses. Rather, these verses have one of two aims: Either there is a real contradiction that implies that how a wise person responds to a fool's arguments must depend upon the specific social context<sup>3</sup> or the contradiction is only apparent, implying that the wise person must respond to a fool's arguments first by not "lowering [himself or herself] to the fool's level in a debate" through adopting the fool's argumentative tactics (e.g., being vindictive, harsh, or untruthful) while, secondly, also not letting the fool get away with those tactics, since they fly in the face of decency and truth.<sup>4</sup>

So with that example in place, I shall propound four theses that I think should inform where we, as Christians, ought to stand regarding

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refers to the New Living Translation and "NIV" to the 2011 New International Version. All emphases in the biblical quotations is mine.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond C. Van Leeuwen writes that "The contradiction of these verses nearly kept Proverbs out of the Jewish canon of biblical books, but the Talmud argued that the admonitions refer to different matters" (*The Book of Proverbs: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections in The New Testament as Bible* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1997], Vol. 2, 224).  
<sup>3</sup> "These verses are *Baldu* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1997], Vol. 2, 224).  
[lies] in this direction: Wisdom does not always mean doing the same thing, even in superficially similar circumstances. Yet the juxtaposition of these admonitions drives one to reflect on the limits of human wisdom, for no clue is given to help the reader identify which fool should be ignored and which spoken to. Of two viable courses of action, we do not always know which is 'fitting'" (Van Leeuwen, 224).

<sup>4</sup> See Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 15-31* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), II.348f. Waltke counters Van Leeuwen's contextual interpretation by showing that, properly interpreted, "Both proverbs are . . . applicable at the same time."

same-sex relations.

**First thesis: Christians should strive to make Scripture their primary language.** What does that mean? It means that human languages do not merely *represent* a reality we experience independently of our learning those languages. It is not as if all of reality is ‘out there’, able to be experienced independently of the use of language, with different languages merely giving each distinct kind of experience a name. It may seem that’s so with some very simple examples: e.g., in English, that’s —pointing at a book—called a “book”; in Greek, a βιβλίο; in Latin, it’s a “liber”; in Spanish, an “el libro”; in German a “buch”.<sup>5</sup> Rather, human languages *constitute* at least part of the reality we experience by shaping our experience. For instance, as lawyers you have been trained to talk and write in specific, characteristically ‘lawyerly’ ways. These ways—this lawyerly ‘language’—shapes your experience. You conceptualize some things differently than the rest of us, knowing (for example) when someone is in danger of being sued for *slander* and knowing the legal difference between *slander* and *libel*. You also value some things differently, such as appreciating a witness’s ability to answer questions concisely without volunteering extra information that may be challenged in various ways.

Yet language constitutes more of reality than that. Have you been

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<sup>5</sup> Even with this example, Charles Taylor argues, reality is less language independent than it seems. See Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2016), chapter 1.

*indignant*? Could you be indignant without language? The online Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary defines indignation as “typically intense deep-felt resentment or anger aroused by annoyance at or displeasure with or scorn over something that actually is or is felt to be unjust or unworthy or mean.” The fact that indignation is a particular kind of emotion that is *aroused by* the sense that something is unjust or unworthy or mean implies that only language users can be indignant. For taking something to be unjust or unworthy or mean involves having a specific *propositional attitude*; namely, the propositional attitude that someone is violating a norm or standard involving our rightful expectation that we and others will be treated respectfully and with goodwill. And while I don’t have time to argue for this, such propositional attitudes are (as the word “propositional” suggests) language dependent.

But we must move on and so I’ll simply quote Lynn Rudder Baker:

there [is] a significant amount of empirical evidence that language shapes thoughts, and that *what and how a person thinks depends on the language one speaks*. . . . Studies have shown that people from different linguistic communities think differently about time, about space, and about agency<sup>[6]</sup>. . . .

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<sup>6</sup> See Boroditsky, Lera. 2001. “Does Language Shape Thought? Mandarin and English Speakers’ Conceptions of Time.” *Cognitive Psychology* 43:1-22.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2011. “How Language Shapes Thought.” *Scientific American* (February): 63-65.

Striking studies show that bilingual people’s preferences change depending on which language they are thinking in. Arabic-Hebrew bilinguals, given implicit-association tests, rate Jews more highly when the tests are given in Hebrew than when they are given in Arabic<sup>[7]</sup>. . . . In another study of bilinguals that had similar results for English-Spanish bilinguals and French-Arabic bilinguals, the authors concluded that the “effects of language on elicited preference were large . . . , providing evidence that *preferences are not merely transmitted through language but also shaped by it.*”<sup>[8]</sup> . . .

According to Lera Boroditsky, a leader in this area of study at Stanford, “The past decade has seen a host of ingenious demonstrations establishing that language indeed plays a causal role in shaping cognition. *Studies have shown that changing how people talk changes how they think.*”<sup>9</sup>

If a language is a unified semantic structure for systematically “communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds,

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<sup>7</sup> Danziger, Shai, and Robert Ward. 2010. “Language Shapes Implicit Associations between Ethnic Groups and Evaluation in Bilinguals.” *Psychological Science* 21 (6): 799-800.

<sup>8</sup> Ogunnaike, Oludamini, Yarrow Dunham, and Mahzarin R. Banaji. 2010. “The Language of Implicit Preferences.” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46 (6): 999-1003.

<sup>9</sup> Boroditsky 2011, 65. The block quotation is from Lynn Rudder Baker, *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 134-35. All emphasis is mine. Some may recognize that these studies seem to confirm the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

gestures, or marks having understood meanings,”<sup>10</sup> then Scripture, even in translation, is a language. And so we should expect those thinking in its language to have their experience shaped by it. They will conceptualize and value differently than those thinking in any other language.

So if our minds are to be transformed as Paul urges at Romans 12:1-2—

With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers [and sisters], as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies [—that is, your whole selves], as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him. Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity<sup>11</sup>—

then we must continuously feed on the language of Scripture. As our Lord declared, human beings do not live on bread alone, but on every word from God. We are *verbivores*—word-eaters. And God’s verbiage, found in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, is meant to be our primary diet

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<sup>10</sup> This is definition 2 b in the online Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary, accessed 30 May 2016.

<sup>11</sup> J. B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English* (New York: Touchstone, 1995). First published in 1960 and revised in 1972.

—the language according to which we conceptualize and value, and which thereby shapes our experience.

**Second thesis: Biblical faith is always *word-based* and *text-regulated*.**

Biblical faith is always our response to God’s initiatives. For instance, God sought out our first parents after they ate the forbidden fruit, holding them accountable yet offering them hope through the *protevangelium*—through his promise that the woman’s offspring would crush the serpent’s head.<sup>12</sup> Trusting that promise, Adam named his wife “Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living” (Gen. 3:20 NIV).<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Eve showed her belief in that promise when, after she gave birth to Cain, she said, “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man” (Gen. 4:1 NIV).

Judeo-Christian faith is essentially *word-based* because it involves not merely believing *that* God exists and believing *in* God—that is, *trusting* him—but also believing God, which means believing what God says. When God appeared to Abraham, he said:

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<sup>12</sup> “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen. 3:15 NIV).

<sup>13</sup> “The mention of Eve brings to our attention the overwhelming confession of hope which is expressed by her name (Gn. 3:20). The name comes from the Hebrew root meaning ‘to live’, as the Bible’s own comment indicates: ‘because she was the mother of all living’. In order to convey the word-play in English we should have to give her a new name like Livia. So Adam called his wife ‘Life’, whereas in fact through her fault death has just entered the world! Where did he get such a bold idea, which almost seems blind to reality? Not from unawareness, but from a very precise awareness of the full significance of the words God has spoken” (Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* [Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1984], 192).

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen. 12:1-3)

And, as the New Testament tells us,

It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going. And even when he reached the land God promised him, he lived there by faith—for he was like a foreigner, living in tents. And so did Isaac and Jacob, who inherited the same promise. Abraham was confidently looking forward to a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and built by God. (Heb. 11:8-10 NLT)

The centrality of words to biblical faith is even more apparent in Deuteronomy:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul



and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-9)

The same focus on Scripture's words is found in the New Testament, including our Lord's quotation of three passages from Deuteronomy to combat the tempter's temptations (see Matt. 4:1-11)<sup>14</sup> as well as Paul's plea that the Philippians hold fast to the word of life. By living "clean, innocent lives as children of God," the Philippians will shine "like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people" (see Phil. 2:15-16 NLT).

Biblical faith is always *text-regulated* in the sense that what God's people are to believe and do is found in the Scriptures. Anticipating Israel's future kings, Moses instructed the Israelites as follows:

"When you come to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it and then say, 'I will set a king

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<sup>14</sup> Daniel I. Block writes that "judging by the number of quotations from Deuteronomy, this was Jesus' favorite book" (*The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012], 26).

over me, like all the nations that are around me,' you may indeed set a king over you whom the LORD your God will choose. . . .

“And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel. (Deut. 17:14-15, 18-20)<sup>15</sup>

Solomon may have thought of this passage when the LORD invited him to ask for whatever he wanted and he replied like this:

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<sup>15</sup> Commenting on the last sentence, Block writes:

The king must read the Torah [meaning chapters 1-30 of Deuteronomy] for himself . . . . Moses begins with a simple directive, “He is to read it all the days of his life,” reinforcing the previous charge to have the document with him constantly. The importance of reading the Torah is highlighted by four purpose clauses, which echo earlier injunctions to the people. (a) Faithful reading of the Torah is key to a proper disposition toward Yahweh. . . . [T]he Torah is portrayed as a medium by which the fear of Yahweh is instilled in the heart/mind.

(b) Faithful reading of the Torah is key to a proper disposition toward other members of the covenant community. . . .

(c) Faithful reading of the Torah is key to the king’s staying on course in his devotion to Yahweh . . . .

(d) Faithful reading of the Torah is key to a secure future. (420-21).

Our Lord’s ability to quote from Deuteronomy “by heart” suggests that he, as the Messiah, took Moses’ instruction seriously.

“You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.

“Now, LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning [literally, a *listening*<sup>16</sup>] heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong.” (1 Kings 3:6-9 NIV)

Similar appeals to regulate our faith and lives by the biblical text appear in the New Testament, including our Lord’s declaration that Scripture cannot be broken (see John 10:35), Paul’s instruction to Timothy to devote himself to the public reading of Scripture as well as to preaching and teaching (see 1 Tim. 4:13), and Peter’s observation that Paul’s

letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

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<sup>16</sup> The Hebrew word is *shāma*<sup>c</sup>, which means hear, listen to, and obey.

Therefore, dear friends, since you have been forewarned, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of the lawless [i.e. the error of those who don't harken to Scripture] and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Pet. 3:16-18 NIV)

Paul regulated his own faith by the biblical text so strictly that he could make a major theological point turn on the fact that Scripture states that God made his promise to Abraham and his seed—singular—and not seeds—plural (see Gal. 3:16 with the Hebrew of Gen. 13:15 and 17:8).<sup>17</sup>

**Third Thesis: Scripture's witness to the wrongness of same-sex relationships is unbroken.** In fact, Scripture witnesses to the wrongness of all sexual relationships other than lifelong heterosexual relationships that do not violate the biblical degrees of consanguinity. The Creator's design for humanity is set out at Genesis 1:26-27:

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<sup>17</sup> To balk at this linguistic, word-based and text-regulated interpretation of proper human life is close to self-refuting because stating what you are balking at requires words.

My argument for the word-based and text-regulated nature of Christian faith reminds what all of the early church fathers believed. As Irenaeus put it, Scripture is “the foundation and pillar of our faith” (see C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953], 370). He recognized that “heretics were liable to read a different meaning out of Scripture than the Church; but [he] was satisfied that, provided the Bible was taken as a whole, its teaching was self-evident. The heretics who misinterpreted it only did so because, disregarding its underlying unity, they seized upon isolated passages and rearranged them to suit their own ideas” (J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, revised edition [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978], 38).

Then God said, “Let us make [humankind—(*adam*)] in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created *them*.

The use of the plural “them” along with the most sexually explicit Hebrew term for “female”<sup>18</sup> emphasizes that part of what God saw to be “very good” at Genesis 1:31 is sexually dimorphic humanity, humanity existing as *both* male *and* female, not human beings existing as male or female alone.

This is elaborated in Genesis 2. Throughout Genesis 1 and 2, the first humans lack proper names, implying they are prototypical humanity; what held for them holds for us. In Genesis 2, after the first man ex-

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<sup>18</sup> “The nominative [of *neqebah*] is formed from the Hebrew verb [*naqab*, which means] pierce (2 Kgs 18:21), bore (a hole) (2 Kgs 12:9); in past participle with the meaning ‘riddled/pierced bag’ (Hag 1:6), i.e., [*sic*] a bag with holes in it. . . . Thus, it would seem that [*neqebah*] refers to the sexual organ of the female” (Victor P. Hamilton in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997], 1.1106, *s.v. zakar*).

*Neqebah*, in other words, focuses on the most obvious difference between men and women—on the unmistakable physical difference that we find, so to speak, in the plumbing. The pair of terms used here—*zakar* and *neqebah*—is also used to differentiate between male and female in the various animal species. (Granted, some human beings are born with sexually ambiguous genitalia, but that is the result of the Fall.)

perienced the frustration of naming all of the animals and thereby recognizing that none of them could be a helper fit for him, God knocked him out so he could take some of his flesh and bone from which to fashion the first woman. When the man awoke, God brought the woman to him, implicitly saying, “Now name this!” The man’s rapturous response—

“At last! . . . This one is bone from my bone,  
and flesh from my flesh!

She will be called *ʾishshâ*,

Because she was taken out of *ʾish*.

(NLT, with Hebrew added)—

attests to the fittingness of the woman’s complementary nature. The man now had someone who was his “like opposite”—for that is what the compound Hebrew prepositional phrase that is usually translated “fit for him” really means. This implies that *lifelong heterosexual marriage is the natural state of adult human beings*. In humanity’s natural state, it is not good for men or women to be alone; we need spouses who are ‘like/opposites’ to us, who both mirror and match us. We need spouses who mirror us and thus can challenge us because they, like we, are fully functioning persons; and we need spouses who match us by being sexually complementary to us and who are thus capable of completing us physically, psychologically, and spiritually.

It is noteworthy that Moses, as the writer not only of Genesis but also of Leviticus, then adds: “This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and [clings to<sup>19</sup>] his wife, and the two are united into one” (Gen. 2:23-24 NLT). The sexual complementarity of the first couple, which is simply noted in Genesis 1, is thereby endorsed as the norm for human sexual relations. Our Lord reaffirmed the inviolability of that norm in his remarks on divorce and remarriage in Matthew 19:3-12, which imply that with sexual relations, it is either lifelong heterosexual marriage or nothing.<sup>20</sup>

As I have said, Scripture witnesses to the wrongness of all sexual

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<sup>19</sup> Hebrew *dabaq*. Earl S. Kalland writes that this word “carries the sense of clinging to someone in affection and loyalty. Man is to cleave to his wife (Gen 2:24). Ruth clave to Naomi (Ruth 1:14). The men of Judah clave to David their king during Sheba’s rebellion (2 Sam 20:2). . . . Most importantly, the Israelites are to cleave to the Lord in affection and loyalty (Deut 10:20; 11:22; 13:4 . . . ; 30:20; Josh 22:5; 23:8)” (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, edited by R. Laird Harris [Chicago: Moody, 1980], I.000000).

Block notes that this verb “denotes decisive and irreversible commitment,” citing Gen. 2:24 and Ruth 1:14 (118n13). The biblical norm of lifelong marriage between a man and a woman is a type of the decisive and irreversible commitment of God to his people (see Isa. 62:4-5)—and, more particularly, of Christ to his Bride (see Eph. 5:25-32; Rev. 19:6-9; 21:9).

<sup>20</sup> Robert A. J. Gagnon summarizes his careful consideration of Jesus’ statements on human sexuality like this:

Jesus took sexual sin very seriously—in some respects more seriously than the prevailing culture in first-century Palestine. *He regarded all sexual activity (thoughts and deeds) outside of lifelong marriage to one person of the opposite sex as capable of jeopardizing one’s entrance into the kingdom of God.* In relation to our own cultural context, Jesus’ views on sex represent on the whole a staunchly conservative position. Those who find in the Gospels a Jesus who is a prophet of tolerance, who forgives and accepts all (except, perhaps, the intolerant), regardless of behavioral change, have distorted the historical reality. (*The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2001], 209; my emphasis)

See also Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 30-31, 74-75.

relationships other than lifelong heterosexual relationships that do not violate the biblical degrees of consanguinity, with the most explicit Old Testament prohibitions of most forms of incest, of homosexual relations, and of bestiality coming in Leviticus, chapters 18 and 20. The prohibition of same-sex relations is entirely unqualified: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (18:22).<sup>21</sup>

In the New Testament, Paul’s letters are the locus of all of the explicit references to homosexuality.<sup>22</sup> If we read his comments in the order written, we find they progress from condemnation of sexual immorality in general (see, e.g., 1 Thess. 4:1-8<sup>23</sup>) to increasingly specific

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<sup>21</sup> DeYoung notes that

in Leviticus 18 and 20, . . . there is a clear progression . . . of sexual sin deviating in increasing measure from the design of male-female monogamy. In Leviticus 18:19-23, the offenses move from sex with a menstruating woman [which is just ritualistically unclean, according to Old Testament standards], to sex with your neighbor’s wife, to sex with another male, to sex with an animal. Each new offense moves another step away from God’s design. Likewise, in Leviticus 20:10-16, the offenses move from sex with your neighbor’s wife, to sex with a family member, to sex with a family member of a younger generation, to sex with another man, to sex with more than one partner, to sex with an animal, to a woman taking the role of a man in approaching an animal to have sex with it. (45)

<sup>22</sup> Because of their references to Sodom and Gomorrah, 2 Pet. 2:6-10 and Jude 7 probably also refer to it. The reference to “the detestable” in Rev. 21:8 is the perfect past participle of βδελύσσομαι (*bdelyssomai*), which is found in its nominative and verbal forms in the Septuagint at Lev. 18:26-27, 29-30 where it refers to the abominable practices—including same-sex relations—of the Canaanites and at Lev. 20:13 where it refers explicitly to same-sex relations. The reference at Rev. 22:15 to “dogs” probably refers to homosexual cult prostitution.

<sup>23</sup> Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. <sup>2</sup>For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. <sup>3</sup>For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality [πορνεία (*porneia*)—“to engage in sexual immorality of any kind,” including but not limited to fornication and prostitution]; <sup>4</sup>that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, <sup>5</sup>not in the passion of lust [ἐπιθυμία (*epithumia*)—“to strongly desire to have what belongs to someone else and/or to



references to particular kinds of sexual immorality. Homosexual practices are first explicitly cited in 1 Corinthians 6, in a lengthy section of Paul's letter dealing especially but not exclusively with sexual relations as they apply to Christians (see 1 Cor. 5-7).

The references to homosexual practice in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 occur in a “vice list” that identifies ten kinds of people who will not inherit the kingdom of God: the sexually immoral (*pornoi*), idolaters, adulterers (*moichoi*), “men who practice homosexuality”<sup>24</sup> (*oute malakoi oute arsenokoitai*), thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, and swindlers.

There are, as Kevin DeYoung notes, “no examples of [the word] *arsenokoitai*”—the second term in this passage referring to homosexual practices—“in the surviving Greek literature prior to Paul's use of the term” here (63). He observes that Paul had been “educated according to the strictest manner of the law of his fathers” and thus “knew the Scripture far better than he knew any other writings” (63f.). Scripture was Paul's

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engage in an activity which is morally wrong”] like the Gentiles who do not know God; <sup>6</sup>that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. <sup>7</sup>For God has not called us for impurity [*ἀκαθαρσία* (*akatharsia*)—“the state of moral impurity, especially in relationship to sexual sin — ‘impurity, immorality, filthiness’”], but in holiness. <sup>8</sup>Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

The quoted definitions of the Greek words come from Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> This is the ESV's way of rendering οὔτε μαλακοὶ οὔτε ἀρσενοκοῖται—literally, ‘neither *malakoi* nor *arsenokoitai*’. These Greek terms refer to persons engaged in two different kinds of homosexual behavior. No one is sure what *malakoi* means. The ESV and NIV collapse the Greek into one phrase that they think covers both kinds. (The NIV's marginal note reads: “The words *men who have sex with men* translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts.”) The NLT retains reference to both kinds, although it is uncertain it renders *malakoi* correctly as “male prostitutes.”

primary language. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint that Paul read, both Leviticus 18:22 and Lev. 20:13 included the Greek words ἄρσενος (*arsenos*—a Greek word meaning *male*) and κοίτην (*koitēn*—a Greek word meaning *bed* or *marital relationship*). So Paul may have coined the term by combining these words as they were found in those passages, especially since they are found back-to-back in Leviticus 20:13.<sup>25</sup> He could have simply removed the space between the two words as they are found in that verse.

*Arsenokoitai* appears once more in the New Testament, in 1 Timothy 1:9, one of Paul’s last writings, where it reiterates Scripture’s blanket condemnation of all kinds of homosexual unrighteousness. The whole passage, from v. 8 through v. 11 reads:

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral [*pornoi*], men who practice homosexuality [*arsenokoitai*], enslavers [*ἀνδραποδιστής*<sup>26</sup>—*andrapodistēs*], liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to

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<sup>25</sup> καὶ ὃς ἂν κοιμηθῆ μετὰ ἄρσενος κοίτην γυναικός, βδέλυγμα ἐποίησαν ἀμό-  
τεροι: (“[And] [i]f a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an  
abomination”). I’ve added the *and* because it is found in the Septuagint.

<sup>26</sup> The NIV and NLT translate this word as “slave traders.” Louw and Nida define it as “one who  
sells persons as slaves, including one who kidnaps persons and sells them.” Its inclusion in this  
list establishes that the New Testament’s attitude to slavery is not as neutral as some maintain.

sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.

Here Paul lists in order the kinds of unrighteousness found in the fourth through the ninth of the Ten Commandments. Since Timothy was in the pagan city of Ephesus,<sup>27</sup> it is not surprising that Paul mentions two kinds of sexual immorality when he is covering the ground represented by the seventh commandment.

Yet it is Paul's references to sexual immorality in Romans 1 that seal the case that Scripture's witness to the wrongness of same-sex relationships is unbroken. In vv. 18-32, Paul is helping us understand why he is not ashamed of the gospel (see 1.16-17). It's because he knows it is the only way ungodly and unrighteous human beings can be made righteous before God (see Rom. 3:21-5:1). Verses 18-23 tell us what pagan ungodliness consists in: it suppresses the truth about God that is knowable from what he has made.<sup>28</sup> Verses 24 through 32 then outline the

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<sup>27</sup> Some Greeks and Romans claimed that homosexual relationships were better than heterosexual ones. For the best survey of attitudes to homosexuality in ancient Greece and Rome, see Thomas K. Hubbard, *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003). Contrary to claims that Scripture only condemns nonconsensual or promiscuous same-sex relations because the ancients knew nothing of more covenantal kinds, Hubbard's book documents that the some Romans practiced same-sex marriage.

<sup>28</sup> By "pagan" I mean nothing more than any non-Jewish or non-Christian view of the world. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., one of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century's great commentators on Romans, entitles the subsection of Rom. 1:18-32, "God's Wrath Manifested Against Pagans" (*Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [New York: Doubleday, 1993], 269). He writes, "In vv 18-32, though Paul speaks only of 'human beings' (*anthrōpoi*, 1:18) and never specifies 'Gentiles' or 'Greeks,' it becomes clear from 2:1 on (or at least from 2:9) that he has been thinking in

kinds of unrighteousness to which God has abandoned the whole non-Jewish world. His three uses of *paradidōmi*—“So God abandoned them” (v. 24), “That is why God abandoned them” (v. 26), and “Since they thought it foolish to acknowledge God, he abandoned them” (v. 28) — trace these truth-suppressors’ increasingly more egregious declensions from true human righteousness.<sup>29</sup>

The first involves God having abandoned the whole non-Jewish

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this first subsection of non-Jewish humanity. Thus he implicitly returns to the division of humanity expressed in 1:16 as ‘Jew’ and ‘Greek’ (= the pagan, heathen, or Gentile) . . . . In this subsection Paul echoes the judgment about the pagan world current among Jews of his day. Nevertheless, he is not saying that every individual pagan before Christ’s coming was a moral failure. He speaks collectively and describes a de facto situation. Moreover, he does not limit his discussion merely to contemporary Greco-Roman society . . . , for he has already made mention of ‘barbarians’ along with ‘Greeks’ (1:14). He has in mind the totality of pagan society” (270).

<sup>29</sup> The NLT’s “abandoned” is better than the ESV’s “gave them up” and especially to the NIV’s “gave them over,” since those phrases could suggest that God made these people sin. Here is Douglas Moo’s comment:

The “therefore” at the beginning of this verse [—“So” in the NLT—] shows that God’s “handing over” of human beings is his response to their culpable rejection of the knowledge of himself that he has made generally available . . . . Paul’s use of the verb “hand over” to describe this retribution has its roots in the OT . . . . Paul here alleges that God has “handed over” people to “uncleanness.” What does Paul mean by this? Clearly he cannot be saying that God impelled people to sin. Not only would this contradict the biblical depiction of God (cf. Jas. 1:13), but the phrase that qualifies this “handing over to uncleanness,” “in the passions of their hearts,” shows that those who were handed over were already immersed in sin. Paul’s purpose in this verse is to highlight the divine side of the cycle of sin; but it must be balanced with the human side, presented in Eph. 4:19, where Paul says that Gentiles “gave themselves up” to licentiousness, leading to all kinds of “uncleanness.” (Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 110-11)

God’s abandonment of those mentioned in Rom. 1:18-32 amounts to this, at least: These truth-suppressors were already engaged in the various sorts of unrighteousness mentioned in vv. 24-32, so God’s abandoning them to these sins meant he allowed them to pursue these sorts of unrighteousness and perhaps even be dominated by them.

world to *akatharsia*, sexual impurity.<sup>30</sup>

The second involves God abandoning them to homosexual sin—both “women [exchanging] natural relations for those that are contrary to nature” and the graphic image of the shameless acts of “men *in* men [ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν].”<sup>31</sup> Paul calls these “dishonorable passions.” All sexual sin—all *akatharsia*—dishonors those involved in it, but unnatural sexual sin is especially dishonoring. Its unnaturalness signals more clearly how egregiously humanity has gone off the rails of godliness and righteousness (see v. 18).<sup>32</sup>

Stopping there for now, we can summarize the New Testament’s posture to same-sex relations like this: Although our Lord implicitly rejects same-sex relations in his remarks in Matthew 19, all of the explicit references to the wrongness of such relations are found in the apostle

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<sup>30</sup> This is what *akatharsia* means in all cases but one in the New Testament. The exception is at Matt 23:27, where it means a more general kind of uncleanness (the “uncleanness” of dead bodies, etc.). Everywhere else—here in Romans 1, along with Rom. 6:19, 2 Cor. 12:21, Gal. 5:19, Eph. 4:19 and 5:3, Col. 3:5, and 1 Thess. 2:3 and 4:7—it refers to various kinds of sexual immorality.

<sup>31</sup> See DeYoung: “The phrase *arsenes en arsesin* could be translated using the preposition “with,” but “men *in* men”—which is how the Latin Vulgate renders the Greek (*masculi in masculos*)—is likely an explicit, if somewhat graphic, reference to the homosexual act itself” (65n1).

<sup>32</sup> In a footnote, Moo says, “Paul criticized homosexual activity as a particularly clear example of the extent to which people have fallen from true knowledge of God” (115). Fitzmyer writes this: “The rhetorical triple use of *paradōken* . . . shifts the discussion from the question of guilt to that of punishment or fate. *Each example intensifies the punishment*” (284, my emphasis). He translates the first several words of v. 26 like this—*For this reason God delivered them over to disgraceful passions*—and then comments:

Lit., “passions of disgrace.” . . . [T]he “disgraceful passions” of which Paul speaks are the sexual perversion of homosexual activity. The depravity involved in such conduct is the merited consequence of pagan impiety and idolatry. Having exchanged a true God for a false one (1:25), pagans inevitably exchanged their true natural functions for perverted ones. (285)

Paul's writings. Paul's references become more explicit as his writings progress. As the gospel went out to the non-Jewish world, he needed to clarify the unacceptability of many of the sexual practices of the non-Jewish world for God's New Testament people. And so, as he declares what kinds of people will be excluded from God's kingdom in his vice list in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, he stresses that some Corinthian Christians had been those kinds of people but were so no longer:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. *And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*<sup>33</sup>

**Fourth Thesis: Scripture emphasizes that the moral standards of the non-Christian world are different than the standards Christians must embrace, and it nowhere encourages political action to make distinctively Christian moral standards the standards of non-**

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<sup>33</sup> This has been a breathtakingly quick tour of the biblical landscape regarding same-sex relations and I am acutely aware that a thorough job would have to address theological issues such as the so-called "redemptive-movement hermeneutic." From my perspective, none of those issues falsifies my claim that Scripture offers an unbroken witness to the wrongness of same-sex relations.

**Christian society.**<sup>34</sup> Romans 1:18-32 does not trace the deflections of individual unbelievers. It does not license our concluding that the reason someone is promiscuous or homosexually active or a murderer is because he or she has been particularly egregious in suppressing the truth about God. Rather, Paul is telling us how everyone, minus God's Old and New Testament people, is prone to think and act as part of the line of humanity that turned away from God starting in Genesis 4.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, because they have suppressed the truth about him, God has consigned the whole non-Jewish and non-Christian world to all sorts of sexual impurity (see v. 24-25), dishonorable passions (see vv. 26-27), and the whole slough of unrighteous thoughts and activities that arise from debased minds (see vv. 28-32).<sup>36</sup> We should expect, then, that embracing distinctively biblical sexual and moral standards requires living counter-culturally. To the extent that those around us are not living by "the obedience that comes from faith" (Rom. 1:5 NIV), we are sur-

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<sup>34</sup> I want to make sure my position is clear: I think Christians must always maintain that same-sex marriage is wrong. So we must never support legislation that runs contrary to this biblical standard. Yet in our cultural situation, we also ought not to engage in political action to impose our distinctively Christian moral standard on our larger and generally non-Christian society.

<sup>35</sup> In Gen. 4, humans divide into two lines. Cain would not harken to God's counsel (see 4:6-7) and thus inaugurated the line of the ungodly who "went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden" (4:16). Yet keeping his promise in the *protevangelium* (see Gen. 3:15b), God did not let Abel's godly line die with him. He gave Eve Seth to replace Abel. And, we are told, it is in Seth's and his son Enosh's time "that people began to call upon the name of the LORD" (4:26). Their line was godly because its members acknowledged God in the ways they should, worshiping and serving him as Creator rather than worshiping and serving creatures.

<sup>36</sup> The Greek for the ESV's "debased mind" is ἀδόκιμον νοῦν. ἀδόκιμος means *unqualified*, *worthless*, or *disreputable*. *Adokimon noūn* is in the singular, which makes sense since those who do not take Scripture for their primary language are all of one mind in their hostility to God and the things of God.

rounded by people prone to the kinds of unrighteous thoughts and activities listed in vv. 24-32.

This doesn't mean that all unbelievers will succumb to all of the kinds of unrighteousness listed in these verses, nor does it imply that all non-Christian cultures are morally equal. But it does mean that cultural manifestations of any of these kinds of unrighteousness should not surprise or unsettle us. All of these kinds of unrighteousness are found on the trajectory that all unbelieving cultures have set themselves upon.

Historically, our culture has been influenced by Christian sexual standards. As it moves away from those standards, the social stigma attached to various kinds of heterosexual or homosexual behavior has faded.<sup>37</sup> This cultural shift has prompted some believers to ask if Christian standards should change. But, in fact, this apparently new and ostensibly morally enlightened perspective condoning (e.g.) heterosexual promiscuity and homosexual behavior is actually ancient<sup>38</sup> and widespread<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> E.g., both Governor Cuomo of New York state and former Mayor Bloomberg of New York city live openly with women outside marriage, which would have been political suicide 20 years ago. And the vast majority of single Americans (including, unfortunately, many who claim to be Christian) no longer consider sex outside marriage to be wrong.

<sup>38</sup> Hubbard's *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome* shows that there is indeed nothing new under the sun. Hubbard tells us, for instance, that

Close examination of a range of ancient texts suggests . . . that some forms of sexual preference were, in fact, considered a distinguishing characteristic of individuals. Many texts even see such preferences as inborn qualities and thus "essential" aspects of human identity: the earliest philosophical account of male sexual passivity [c. 500 BCE] . . . traces it to a failure of male and female seed to blend properly at the moment of conception. Other medical writers consider effeminacy in men and masculinity in women to be genetically determined. (2)

(continued next page)



—people have been violating God’s intentions for human sexuality almost from the start.<sup>40</sup> So the mere fact our culture is increasingly open to unbiblical sexual standards isn’t good reason for us to doubt Christian sexual standards or to think they should change. Distinctively biblical sexual standards have always had to swim against the stream, and even when our culture gave them lip service, they were often violated privately.

In other words, the degree of sexual immorality in our culture may wax or wane, but our obedience to God’s moral standards must not.<sup>41</sup> Like the Philippians, we must hold fast to the word of life, for it is by

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Suetonius (c. 69-130 CE) reports a same-sex marriage involving Nero (see 391), and Hubbard notes that long-term, consensual, legally contracted relationships were not unknown (see 8 and 126).

<sup>39</sup> John Stott cites this observation from C. H. Dodd’s commentary on Romans:

What Paul saw plainly . . . was that Greek philosophy ‘easily came to terms with the grossest forms of superstition and immorality. And so it did, just as it is a grave count against the lofty philosophy of Hinduism that it utters no effective protest against the most degrading practices of popular religion in India today.’ (*Romans: God’s Good News for the World* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994], 76)

<sup>40</sup> For instance, Lamech had two wives (see Gen. 4:19), in spite of Scripture’s clear witness that God intended for human beings to live in lifelong, heterosexual pairs.

<sup>41</sup> DeYoung writes:

It cannot be overstated how seriously the Bible treats the sin of sexual immorality. Sexual sin is never considered *adiaphora*, a matter of indifference, an agree-to-disagree issue like food laws or holy days . . . . To the contrary, sexual immorality is precisely the sort of sin that characterizes those who will not enter the kingdom of heaven. There are at least eight vice lists in the New Testament (Mark 7:21-22; Rom. 1:24-31; 13:13; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Col. 3:5-9; 1 Tim. 1:9-10; Rev. 21:8), and sexual immorality is included in *every* one of these. In fact, in seven of the eight lists there are multiple references to sexual immorality (e.g., impurity, sensuality, orgies, men who practice homosexuality), and in most of the passages some kind of sexual immorality heads the lists. You would be hard-pressed to find a sin more frequently, more uniformly, and more seriously condemned in the New Testament than sexual sin. (74)

living “clean, innocent lives as children of God” that we too will shine “like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people.” The contrast between our culture and us displays the superiority of Judeo-Christian faith.<sup>42</sup> By courageously maintaining Scripture’s sexual standards, we—Christ’s church—are the world’s salt and light (see Matt. 5:13-16).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> At Deut. 4:5-8, Moses makes this point like this:

“Look, I now teach you these decrees and regulations just as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may obey them in the land you are about to enter and occupy. *Obey them completely, and you will display your wisdom and intelligence among the surrounding nations. When they hear all these decrees, they will exclaim, ‘How wise and prudent are the people of this great nation!’* For what great nation has a god as near to them as the LORD our God is near to us whenever we call on him? And what great nation has decrees and regulations as righteous and fair as this body of instructions that I am giving you today?” (NLT)

Of course, sin may blind people to recognizing the superiority of the Judeo-Christian faith. See, e.g., Scripture’s repeated observation that some may see but not see and hear but not hear (see Isa. 6:9-10; Matt. 13:10-17; 2 Cor. 4:2-4). Yet that does not falsify the fact that its superiority is indeed being displayed (see 1 Cor. 2) and that God may use that display to convict unbelievers of Christian truth.

<sup>43</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner translates Matt. 5:13 like this—“You folks are the very salt of the earth! But if that salt loses its tang, how is it ever going to be salty again? It is absolutely useless except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot”—and then comments that

(1) The communal, plural address [the “You folks” as he translates it] should be noticed first: It is Christian communities that are Jesus’ great missionary means. . . . (3) The emphatic expression “*the very salt*” captures the force of the strong definite article (*ho*) before the noun: disciples are “the definite article”! They are not just “a” salt of the earth along with many others. . . . There are seeds of a high doctrine of the church here.

He adds, regarding the salt losing its tang, that

Salt can either pursue its function — enter food — or deny its function, either by not entering the food at all or by entering the food and ceasing to be salt there. Thus the *warning* . . . is meant to shake Christians up. While Christians are not challenged to *become* salty — their saltiness is a gift of Jesus’ presence — they are challenged to *stay* salty, that is, they are challenged to be what they are — *real Christians.* . . . There are pressures at

Yet maintaining Scripture’s sexual standards does not require foregrounding them. Salvation gives meaning and motive to obedience,<sup>44</sup> and so we must prioritize leading men and women to faith in Christ, from which the new, righteous life will spring. The Christian mission is *first* to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and *then* to teach them to obey all of our Lord’s commandments.<sup>45</sup>

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work all around us and within us not to be *too* Christian . . . . Though we are salt, there is constant pressure to be insipid salt. Some pressure to “back off” is the work of the Dove Spirit who makes people humane, sensitive, and gentle; but some of this pressure is the work of the Evil One who makes people cowards and temporizing. (Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], revised and expanded edition, Vol. 1: The Christbook, 187-90; the underlining in both blocks is added).

<sup>44</sup> Thus this passage in Deuteronomy:

“When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us.’” (Deut. 6:20-25)

Similarly, in the apostle Paul’s letters, the good news of what God has done for us in Christ—e.g., “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:3-4 ESV; cf. Col. 1:21-23)—usually precedes his exhortation to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called” (Eph. 4:1; cf. Col. 2:6). As he wrote in 1 Corinthians, the unrighteous—the unsaved—will not inherit God’s kingdom, *and such were some of the Corinthian Christians*. “But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:11). Their new identity in Christ motivated and indeed required changes in their ways of life.

<sup>45</sup> See Matt. 28:18-20 and John 14:15—“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Baptism inaugurates the new believer into new life in Christ, from which obedience to our

Our lives are meant “to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere, like a sweet perfume,” yet those who are perishing perceive us as reeking of “a dreadful smell of death and doom” (2 Cor. 2:14-16 NLT). So while the New Testament makes it very clear that God will ultimately judge everyone by the moral standards he has articulated for his New Testament people, we must recognize that our sexual standards will prompt hostility, revulsion, and derision in our increasingly pluralistic society, tempting everyone to hate us (see Matt. 24:9).<sup>46</sup> And while Scripture also suggests that societies violating those standards will find the land itself rejecting them,<sup>47</sup> it does not encourage us to take political action to make our distinctively Christian moral standards the standards of the society at large, *even if maintaining those standards would be*

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Lord’s commands will spring.

<sup>46</sup> In his commentary on Matthew 24:9, Bruner first acknowledges that “In Matthean and biblical teaching the tribulation of the latter days,” to which this verse is referring, “is a *Christian* experience and ‘runs from the first advent to the second’ . . . We’re in it!” (Bruner, *ibid.*, Vol. 2: The Churchbook, 483; my underlining). Commenting on the second half of the verse—“And you will be a people hated by all the nations because of your devotion to my name” (Bruner’s translation)—he says that the Greek for *you will be hated* means, literally, “‘you will *be being* hated,’ suggesting ongoing, persistent enmity” (484). He notes that this, “Jesus’ most surprising promise, his ‘promise of universal hatred,’ is found in all three Synoptic Gospels in almost identical language . . . and in a closely related form in John’s Gospel” (484), teaching “disciples not to be alarmed or even surprised when a professedly tolerant world increasingly despises the church” (484; my underlining). Summarizing, he writes that “The final persecution is not aimed at outstanding individuals only; it is directed against the *whole* church, ‘*by all the nations*’ (484). “In the end,” he says, “*something* about the church will receive such attention in public discourse and will seem so culpable in people’s eyes that a worldwide persecution will be the result. Perhaps one cause will be the church’s ‘intolerance’ of other absolutes. . . . Pluralism is in most ways a great good. But when devotion to it assumes religious proportions, disciples of the *one* God will always be odious” (485; my underlining).

<sup>47</sup> E.g., Lev. 18:24-28 and 20:22 portray nature herself reacting against perverse and unnatural sexual practices.

*good for us as well as for the larger society's good.*<sup>48</sup>

So, for instance, the New Testament nowhere explicitly encourages Christians to try to make their distinctively Christian moral standards the standards of the societies in which they live. This could be because the forms of government in New Testament times didn't promote political action by its ordinary citizens or it could be because Christians were such a small minority in those societies, but I don't think it was for either of those reasons. But here we have need to exercise some of the subtlety that I urged in opening my talk.

The New Testament is explicit about how we are to posture ourselves towards unbelievers and the larger unbelieving society.<sup>49</sup> In gen-

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<sup>48</sup> By "our distinctively Christian moral standards" I mean biblically based moral standards that are not acknowledged by some significant portion (although it doesn't need to be a majority) of the society at large. Some of our moral standards are held by most of our society, such as the so-called civil liberties of freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and the right of free assembly. Some civil rights, such as the right of a person of any color or religion to be served in public restaurants, are also acknowledged by virtually everyone in our society. My claim regarding political action holds only for our distinctive moral standards.

By "political action" I am referring to attempts by Christians to enshrine in civil or criminal law such distinctively Christian moral standards—and, in particular, the Christian prohibition of same-sex relations. Christians may seek legal recourse to defend their civil rights, such as the apostle Paul's appeal to Caesar or our appeal to the courts for various kinds of statutory relief, even though, as we shall see, the New Testament suggests it is sometimes appropriate for Christians to forgo legal recourse even though it is available.

I think sexual behavior between consenting adults falls into a different category than, e.g., abortion or even transgender bathroom use, and so my arguments in the remainder of this paper should be applied quite narrowly. I am not sure how to approach the abortion and transgender issues, since both involve non-consenting parties (see my final paragraph).

<sup>49</sup> In the Old Testament, distinctively Jewish moral standards were legally enshrined in the nation of Israel, with penalties matching the severity of the transgressions. At that stage in redemptive history, the purity of Israel's national life through her obedience to God's laws was crucial, witnessing to the reality of her God (see footnote 42). But those laws were for that time and place. While we, his New Testament people, are still "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" who are to "proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out

eral, we are to submit to the government and its officers (see Tit. 3:1 and 1 Pet. 2:13-14), at least in part as a way of silencing the foolish talk of ignorant people (see 1 Pet. 2:15).<sup>50</sup> We are to do good and pursue peace (see 1 Pet. 3:11; Rom. 12:18; 2 Tim. 2:24), while recognizing that we may suffer for righteousness' sake (see 1 Pet. 3:14, 17). We are to be humble and yet fearless (see 1 Pet. 3:8, 14; Tit. 3:2). We must be gentle and even deferential (see Tit. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:25; 1 Pet. 3:15), avoiding slander and quarreling (see Tit. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:24), and being kind to everyone (see 2 Tim. 2:24-25). We must patiently endure evil (2 Tim. 2:24), blessing and not cursing those who persecute us (see Rom. 12:14; Tit. 3:9). We must not repay evil with evil or insult with insult (see Rom. 12:17). We are to eschew revenge, leaving room for God to exercise judgment in his own time (see Rom. 12:19). Indeed, we are to do good to our enemies (Rom. 12:20), overcoming evil with good (see Rom. 12:21), and going the extra mile (see Matt. 5:38-42). *We are not to enforce sexual standards with unbelievers in the way that we do with believers because enforcing those standards with unbelievers would require us to leave the world* (see 1 Cor. 5:9-13).

Our motivation for maintaining this posture involves remembering who we ourselves were:

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of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9), we are no longer to live as a separate nation. As the world's salt and light, we fulfill the Great Commission by penetration rather than by separation.

<sup>50</sup> It is noteworthy that the vast majority of the passages I cite in this paragraph are from the final New Testament writings, when Christian faith was beginning to spread in non-Christian societies.

Once we, too, were foolish and disobedient. We were misled and became slaves to many lusts and pleasures. Our lives were full of evil and envy, and we hated each other.<sup>51</sup>

But—“When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. Because of his grace he declared us righteous and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life.” (Tit. 3:3-7 NLT)

Recognizing that our own sins, no matter what they were (and are), are truly damnable, makes us truly humble, gentle, kind and loving<sup>52</sup> (like God has been to us) to everyone else.<sup>53</sup> Continually recalling our own sinfulness fosters our hope that “God may perhaps grant [some unbeliev-

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<sup>51</sup> Although the sins of cradle Christians may not seem anywhere near as egregious as those of adult converts who have come out of the unbelieving society, they are in fact every bit as damning. This is part of what Paul is establishing in Romans 2 and 3, where he concludes that ultimately the excuses offered by each and every human being will be silenced and the whole world will stand guilty before God. “For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are” (Rom. 3:20 NLT; see v. 19).

The NLT puts all but one word of the next paragraph in quotation marks because it interprets it to be a summary or quotation from some bit of traditional teaching.

<sup>52</sup> A remarkable instance of such lovingkindness was shown by the local Chick-fil-A restaurant after the Orlando attack on a gay nightclub. Although Chick-fil-A is always closed on Sunday out of Christian reverence, the Lee Vista branch made an exception to come in and prepare food to pass out for free to the blood donors, lawmen, and volunteers involved in the work of cleaning up after the attack.

<sup>53</sup> See Bruner’s comment about the work of the Dove Spirit near the end of footnote 43.

ers] repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and [that] they may [thus] come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after [having been previously] captured by him to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:25-26). For some of us, recalling our sinfulness will remind us that we were once numbered among the kinds of unrighteous people whom Paul declared will not inherit God’s kingdom (see 1 Cor. 6:9-11).

Maintaining the hope that God may grant some unbelievers repentance leading to conversion, we must then adopt strategies that don’t foreclose this possibility. We must always be ready to give reasons to anyone who asks about the grounds of our Christian hope, and yet we must do so in a way that allows us to maintain a good conscience so that unjust slander against us can’t stick (see 1 Pet. 3:15-16). We must be wise, speaking graciously to unbelievers, and avoid sloganeering by tailoring our answers to individual persons (see Col. 4:5-6). We must, in other words, show a proper respect to everyone (see 1 Pet. 2:17; 3:15) and thus aim to do what is honorable not only in God’s sight but in the sight of everyone.<sup>54</sup>

Here we must think subtly about what is honorable in a principled pluralistic society. In such a society it is honorable to permit those who disagree with each other to live each according to their sincere convictions as long as their living according to those convictions does not seri-

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<sup>54</sup> See 2 Cor. 8:21. In its context, this verse refers to a standard for believers with each other, but its appeal to a standard of honor that holds among human beings is one that would be recognized by more than just Christians.



ously harm others. In other words, we must do unto others what we want them to do to us, which is an essential tenet of principled pluralism. Summarizing, I think that living according to these biblical principles means we ought not (e.g.) to refuse to make cakes for gay weddings, because making them does not seriously harm us. Rather, it involves our being willing to go the extra mile, shows gay couples that we respect them even though we disagree with their position, and thus maintains peace. Living according to these principles also involves our not taking political action to enshrine in civil or criminal law what are currently taken by our society to be distinctively biblical moral standards, such as the prohibition of same-sex marriage.<sup>55</sup>

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