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# **New Testament on homosexuality**

## **Denying God's purpose**

The ELCA Conference of Bishops, meeting in retreat March 2, heard two papers examining what the Bible says about homosexual behavior. They were presented by Terence E. Fretheim, professor of Old Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn., and Walter F. Taylor Jr., professor of New Testament studies, Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio.

Here's the response from Walter T. Taylor.

### **I. Introduction**

I want first to thank Professor Fretheim for an excellent lecture that moves us far beyond only looking at the texts, as important as that is.

Three preliminary remarks:

1) This is not merely a theoretical issue for me nor can it be for anyone who is engaged in the life of the church and who is honest. I could use the rest of my time talking about childhood friends, adult friends, former students, current students, parents of students, and friends of our children whom we have seen mature and come to understand themselves as gay or lesbian. For some reason, gay and lesbian people and people who care about them regularly come to me for conversation and prayer, and so I do not carry out my scholarship, my ministry, nor this presentation in splendid isolation from gay and lesbian people. The most helpful thing Paul Jersild writes in his discussion on homosexuality in his book *Spirit Ethics* is that, for the first time, churches are facing the issue of homosexuality with fellow Christians who are professed gays and lesbians. "Now we know the gay person as one of us, a fellow member of the household of faith." [1]

Every time I speak on this topic, I do so expecting that there are gay and lesbian people in the room.

2) All of that points to an internal struggle that I have had and continue to have on the topic of homosexuality. At an intuitive level, part of me wants to say, "What's the big deal! Let's just take people where they are, lift the restrictions on ordination, and get on with things." My struggle, however, is that my commitment to the biblical witness and my reading of it do not allow me to make that move. So you are dealing today with someone who is very sympathetic to arguments for acceptance--so I was lambasted by traditionalists after an interview on the Bible and homosexuality that was published in *The Lutheran* [2] — as well as with someone who ends up on the traditional side of the continuum — so that I was similarly blasted by people at the far side of the acceptance position. I hope, however, that you will find me to be a reasonable

traditionalist. Part of what we are about today and throughout the ELCA at this point in time, is discerning what God's will is. For some people that will is quite obvious, but for most of us it is a bit more muddified.

3) I have been asked to work with you on the New Testament material dealing with homosexuality. Strictly speaking, of course, we could quit right now, since the word homosexuality had not yet been coined when the Bible was written, and therefore the Bible does not speak about that specific term. The word itself, I believe, was first used only in 1869. But certainly the Bible does have a number of passages that talk about same-sex sexual relationships, an infelicitous phrase that I will use repeatedly. I need to acknowledge, however, that in the time allotted there is no way I can do exhaustive work on the passages or the hermeneutics in applying them. I will not move into scientific evidence for the supposed "causes" of homosexuality. The evaluation of that evidence, as far as I can tell, ends in a stalemate anyway over the issue of nature versus nurture, nor was I asked to discuss that topic. What I will do is to focus on the use of the Bible and the texts that are important for discerning a Christian position on the topic of same-sex sexual relationships.

## II. Use of the Bible in Making Ethical Decisions

Even though I have just finished saying that I don't have enough time, I do want to take the time to suggest various models for using the Bible in making ethical decisions. As Professor Fretheim and I compared notes a couple of weeks ago, we noted how often we are asked to talk about texts but how seldom anyone asks us to deal with how people today might move from texts to modern ethical decisions. Because I think that is such an important issue and because it is so often ignored, I want to begin with that topic.

Everyone who reads the Bible comes at that reading task with underlying presuppositions. No one comes to the reading of the Bible totally fresh or totally without preconceived notions of what s/he will find. Usually those presuppositions are unstated. Indeed, most people have no idea that they have any presuppositions. In fact, the person who says, "I just read the Bible at face value and believe and try to do what it says," is operating with a whole host of presuppositions.

What I want to do briefly is ask what some of the presuppositions are when people read the Bible, especially when they read the Bible to obtain ethical direction. What are different ways in which the Bible has been used in developing Christian ethical positions--or not used, as the case may be? I would like to suggest six basic models. Part of the scheme comes from Victor Paul Furnish. [3]

### A. Sacred Cow

In Hindu India, the cow is sacred. It cannot be touched, harmed, or restricted. Furnish uses this example and label to talk about our first view of the relationship of the Bible and ethics. In this view the Bible is viewed as a written deposit of God's truth valid in very specific ways for all times and places. Everything in the Bible is eternally and universally binding. The Bible's ethical statements are not to be touched, disturbed, and certainly not in any sense explained away. They are to be taken at face value. [4]

The Bible thus supplies the content not only for the church's doctrinal teachings but for ethics as well. The Bible, then, is viewed as a book of revealed morality. That is, God revealed details of the right way to live, and what God revealed was to be valid forever. So an equation sign is put between the Bible and today. In this view, what the Bible says about family life and human sexuality should be the standard for Christians today.

#### B. Traditional

In this view, human nature is viewed as fundamentally constant from century to century and culture to culture. Thus cultural variables shade but do not provide the primary shape of ethical norms. The ethical norms of Israel, therefore, since they are part of God's will, became part of the ethical identity of Jesus and the early church. Such ethical norms and prescriptions are valid for modern Christians, says this position, as long as they are filtered through the fundamental theological and ethical commitments of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus prescriptions concerning family life and human sexuality remain valid for the Christian community unless they are clearly opposed by Jesus or the rest of the New Testament witness or unless they represent cultural peculiarities (e.g., concern for sexual relations between men and menstruating women).

#### C. Neo-Traditional

This view is very significant today. It agrees with the presuppositions of the traditional view. The major difference is that the neo-traditional view insists that we have, in fact, often misunderstood the Bible. Traditional interpretations are therefore often misleading, for the Bible really says things quite different from what we thought the Bible said. When correctly understood, the Bible serves as the source and norm of the church's ethical values. The trick is in understanding the Bible correctly. This position has been of crucial importance in the decision of the Lutheran Church to ordain women, for example. This position maintains the authority of the Bible, but argues that previous interpretations so misunderstood the biblical witness that the freedom of women to be leaders in the Christian community was ignored. A proper understanding of the texts thus opens new possibilities.

#### D. Source of Principles

For Christians who take this position, the authority of the Bible for ethics does not rest in its specific moral instruction on particular problems but rather in its revealing of over-arching norms, values, and ideals that are binding on the Christian life. These norms, values, and ideals need to be translated or applied by today's Christian community, so say the proponents of this position, since the biblical material was produced in specific cultures that no longer exist. For certain readers of the Bible, this position can be close to the traditional or neo-traditional, but for many who take this position the principles are much more general. Many in this camp would take the Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you") as a principle; other readers of the Bible today take "love" as a basic ethical principle. But often such folks become nervous when specific ethical directives from the Bible are applied to life today, especially in the area of human sexuality.

## E. Source of Identity and Dialogue Resource

This title is a bit cumbersome, but I include this model as a way to recognize the provocative book of our emeritus colleague from Southern Seminary, Paul Jersild. In his book, *Spirit Ethics*, Professor Jersild proposes a model for how to do ethics in the post-modern world. The function of the Bible is chiefly to provide a major source of identity for the Christian community in its self-understanding and in its understanding of God. He adopts a reader-response model in which the Bible, essentially, says what the church says it says. The Bible becomes a resource for the dialogue between the church and the pluralistic society in which the church finds itself, but he is most restive about current application of any ethical directives from the Bible. Although application of his basic approach does lead to rather traditional positions on euthanasia and assisted suicide, when he comes to homosexuality he places major weight on contemporary experience and scientific developments, with the Bible in effect being subordinated to them.

## F. White Elephant

A final position is what Furnish labels the "white elephant." A white elephant is something that is expensive but useless. In this view, the Bible is an antiquated and out-dated relic of a long-ago past that has no relevance to today. It is to be discarded because it is too old; because its New Testament authors were too excited about the coming of the end of the world; because it was written by men; etc. Ethical positions are to be developed totally apart from the Bible, with the only use of the Bible being to provide the most general outlines of the story of God with God's people.

As you look at these six positions, you will see that I have arranged them in a certain order. The order runs from taking the Bible and plunking it down into today without any attention to original context (the sacred cow position) to denying the Bible any relevance for ethical decision-making at all (the white elephant position). In between are the other four positions.

These approaches are crucial when people come to reading the Bible, for they already program how the reader will deal with the ethical material in the Bible. In addition to what I have outlined, how much the reader uses historical understanding of biblical times and the Bible itself, and/or how much the reader uses contemporary sociological, anthropological, and psychological approaches to understand the Bible also have a great deal to say about how the person will read the biblical text.

## III. The New Testament and Same-Sex Sexual Activity

### A. Same-sex sexual activity in the Graeco-Roman world

As part of our attention to context, we need to look at same-sex relations in the world in which the New Testament was written. Starting in the sixth century B.C., same-sex sexual love between men was a part of Greek life. The development of that kind of love as acceptable in at least some circles went hand-in-hand with the increasing denigration of women in Greek society. Since women were kept uneducated and were considered to be almost a biological accident (that is, not

quite male), some men at least did not think they could have relationships of equality with them.

The particular same-sex relationship that developed was pederasty, the love of an older man for a younger man or youth. Such relationships were not by definition exploitative nor necessarily abusive. Pederasty still existed at the time of Paul, especially in the upper classes, but such relationships were being more and more questioned by the moral thinkers of the day. The moralists people such as Seneca, Plutarch, and Dio Chrysostom decried especially what they saw as the increasing inequality of the relationships, as some men exploited their male slaves for sexual pleasure. It was not uncommon in brothels and even in private households to castrate attractive boys to prolong their youthful appearance. The call boy and the male prostitute were universally condemned in the written literature that has survived. Same-sex sexual activity, during the first century A.D., was also viewed by the moralists as against nature, an argument used by Paul. [5]

At the same time, there are widespread examples in antiquity, especially in the Roman world in which Paul lived, of committed same-sex relationships between equals. [6] Cicero (106-43 B.C.) and Martial (first century A.D.) are just two of the authors who write about stable same-sex relationships between men. Cicero writes, e.g., about a male couple "united in a stable and permanent marriage, just as if he [Curio] had given him [Antonius] a matron's stola." (Philippic 2.18.45) The stola was the distinctive dress of a married Roman woman. Erotic literature written during the Republic (Catullus, e.g.) as well as during the Empire (Vergil, Tibullus, Horace, and Ovid) speaks of erotic love between men without batting a judgmental eye.

Whereas in earlier centuries there had been a prejudice in the Roman world against same-sex activity in which one man played the more passive role, that view was abandoned by the early Empire, says Boswell, for more reciprocal homoerotic relations in which the active-passive distinction became unimportant. Such relationships were found among the emperors. We see that with Nero, emperor from 54-68 A.D., and thus the emperor during the height of Paul's career. Nero married two men in succession, both in public ceremonies. The spouse was given the honors of an empress. Probably the most famous pair of lovers in the Roman world were Hadrian and Antinous. [7] They lived, of course, after the time of Paul (Hadrian was emperor from 117-138), but their widely known relationship is indicative of the Roman world at the time of the writing of the New Testament.

This information is of great importance, I think. A frequent argument against taking Paul in any way as normative is that he could necessarily have known only of relationships that were pederastic (Scroggs) or abusive (Furnish). He could have known nothing about public, committed relationships of equals. Now obviously no one, including me, knows exactly what Paul did or did not know, but it is a simple historical mistake to say that he could not have known about relationships between equals, since such relationships did indeed exist and were widely known. [8] Now to specific texts.

## B. 1 Timothy 1:9-10

Our first text is from the deutero-Pauline tradition, 1 Timothy 1:9-10; the document was probably written in the 90s of the first century to update Paul for a new era. [9]

We read in the NRSV: "This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching."

Key is understanding what the words "fornicators, sodomites, and slave traders"; mean. The first word, *por/noj*, pornos, "fornicator" in the NRSV, in normal Greek usage means "male prostitute," meaning either the male who sells himself or the slave in the brothel. It often is extended in the New Testament to include sexual immorality in general, but the connection with the next two terms points toward the male prostitute meaning. The next term, the NRSV's "sodomite," translates the Greek word *arsenokoi/thj*, *arsenokoit\_s*, from *ars\_hn*, *ars\_n* = "male" and *koi/th*, *koit\_* = "bed" and by extension "marriage" and then sexual intercourse in general. So, literally, one who lies with a male; the gender of the term is masculine. Its first occurrence in extant Greek literature is 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. Scroggs thinks that it translates the rabbinic term, *mishkav zakur*, "lying with a male," used in rabbinic literature for men having same-sex relations. [10]

The term seems to indicate the active partner in the homosexual relationship, i.e., the one who hires the *por/noj*, pornos, to satisfy his desires. There is certainly no sense of an equal relationship. The *por/noj*, pornos is to experience no pleasure. In fact, it is considered bad form for the *por/noj*, pornos to ejaculate. Only the customer is to reach that form of sexual pleasure.

The final word, *andrapodisth/j*, *andrapodist\_s*, occurs only here in the New Testament. It means "kidnapper" or "slave dealer," thus the NRSV "slave trader." In our world those terms designate two different concepts, but in the first century they were synonyms. A person was kidnapped, normally, not for ransom nor to avoid a court-ordered custody arrangement but to be sold into slavery. And one reason an attractive boy or girl would be kidnapped was to provide slaves for the brothel houses. Thus the kidnapper or slave dealer is one who is involved in the sexual profession, ultimately being the one who provides the *por/noj*, pornos, who is used by the *arsenokoi/thj*, *arsenokoit\_s*.

Thus this list in 1 Timothy, despite how it is often translated, probably does not condemn same-sex sexual relationships in general, but that specific form of pederasty that consisted of enslaving boys or youths for sexual purposes, and the use of these boys by adult males. I know of no one who argues that that kind of behavior is to be approved, so the text potentially drops out as a source of guidance for determining a contemporary Christian ethic. Others, however, have seen the three terms as distinct and would therefore see 1 Timothy as potentially addressing today's situation. For them *por/noj*, pornos, refers to an immoral man (or in Quinn and Wacker, "the incestuous"), *arsenokoi/thj*, *arsenokoit\_s*, to a homosexual or one engaged in a same-sex sexual relationship, and "slave trader" as "simply" a slave trader and not someone specializing in kidnapping future prostitutes. [11]

Thus for those interpreters the text does not deal with prostitution but same-sex sexual activity in general.

### C. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Our second New Testament text is 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers — none of these will inherit the kingdom of God."

It is quite instructive to see how a translation can affect our entire understanding of a passage. One of my correspondents, writing from Texas, quoted the NIV on this passage: "Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders ... will inherit the kingdom of God." If that is what a person thinks the text says, the options become quite narrow. For that matter, the first edition of the RSV (1946) translates the two Greek terms as "homosexuals." The second edition (1971) changed it to "sexual perverts."

Two terms from 1 Timothy reappear (actually, of course, they appeared chronologically first in 1 Corinthians). We have the *porneoi*, pornos, or "sexually immoral person" again, a term that we have seen can refer to sexual immorality in general, or that could refer to a male prostitute. "Idolaters" and "adulterers" come next, followed by the term "male prostitute," as translated by the NRSV. The Greek term translated as "male prostitute" is *malakoi*, *malakos*, which means "soft, weak, effeminate," and was used especially for the same-sex call boy or, more generally, for the passive partner in same-sex sexual relationships. The *arsenokoi*/*arsenokoitai*, the third word, brings us again to the male customers (NRSV: "sodomites"). Thus while it is possible that the passage refers to male same-sex sexual relationships in general, there is a certain probability that it refers to the relationship between a prostitute and a customer. [12]

While I think the prostitution reference is probable, again, as with 1 Timothy 1, that interpretation is not universally held.

In any event, this kind of same-sex relationship is, for Christians, to be left behind. Verse 11: "And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." Moreover, the way the passage is introduced ("do you not know") likely points to the fact that this material was used catechetically in the early church; that is, it was used to remind and teach Christians how to act. [13]

For Thiselton, that fact alone makes the passage "an even more important and foundational passage than Romans 1." He is also not so sure that the language is limited to prostitution. [14]

### D. Romans 1:26-27

Over against Thiselton, I believe that Romans 1:26-27 is the most important biblical material that needs to be taken into account when formulating a Christian theological understanding of homosexuality. While 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 are both often cited in discussions, they probably deal with pederasty and even male homosexual prostitution. The argument in Romans more clearly than the other two passages is based on fundamental theological

commitments and is independent of pederasty and prostitution.

## 1. Context

In working with this passage we need to recall the context. We have had the thesis in 1:16-17, on the gospel of the righteousness of God. In verse 18 the wrath of God is being revealed against all impiety and a) *diki/an*, *adikian*, "injustice" or, more properly in contrast to verse 17, "unrighteousness." So, the righteousness of God is revealed against the unrighteousness of humanity. What we have in verses 19-32 is a laying out of the unrighteousness of humanity.

Verses 18-25.

1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; 21 for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools; 23 and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. 24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

Paul does more than give a laundry list of bad things. Rather, he seeks to deal with the root of sins. The root is the rebellion of the creature against the creator. Usually we think of immorality as the cause of God's wrath, but as Koosemann phrases it, "Paul paradoxically reverses the cause and consequence: moral perversion is the result of God's wrath, not the reason for it." [15]

Or, as Paul Achtemeier phrases it, "the wrath which God visits on sinful humanity consists in simply letting humanity have its own way. ... God, says Paul, delivers sinful humanity over to its own desires." [16]

In essence, God says, "You want to be lord of your life? Fine. Go ahead." And then we see what happens.

The results are twofold:

a) On the one hand, the specific examples of sinful behavior which are listed are not the primary focus of Paul's concern. They are illustrations of the results of the rebellion. That certainly does not soften what Paul has to say about same-sex sexual relationships, which is quite straightforward if not blunt, but it does mean that he is not out to "get" homosexuals or people involved in same-sex sexual relationships. [17]

b) On the other hand, for Paul rebellion against God and the resulting idolatry result, according



to Scroggs, "in a false world with a false self, that is unnatural. The false self finds homosexuality pleasing and sees nothing wrong in what is for the Apostle a deflection of desire from opposite sex to same sex." [18]

## 2. The Core Verses

Verse 26: "For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural."

As an independent statement these words would not necessarily refer to female homosexuality. As an isolated statement they could refer to certain coital heterosexual positions deemed inappropriate by Jews or to artificial objects used by women to stimulate themselves. When verse 27 is taken into account, however, verse 26 must certainly refer to female same-sex relations. [19]

Such relations, for Paul, are against nature. Why against nature? Paul no doubt here thinks of Genesis 1-2, with the creation of male and female, together with the charge to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:27-28; 2:18). [20]

By refusing to honor God as creator, Paul argues, the women in verse 26 and the men in verse 27 are denying one of the created purposes for their sexual lives and therefore are living out in their bodies their denial of God as creator. For that reason, I think, Paul's choice of same-sex sexual relationships as an example — and, indeed, the primary example — is not casual. It strongly supports his argument. [21]

The language "against nature," by the way, was typical in Jewish and Graeco-Roman texts to distinguish between cross-gender and same-sex sexual relationships and goes back at least to Plato. In every text it is used as a negative reference. To live "naturally," on the other hand, was to use objects, including one's own body, in the ways intended for them in creation. [22]

Actually, it is very unusual that such female relations should be mentioned at all. In fact, this is the only time in the Bible. We may see, in fact, Paul's attention to inclusivity coming through. Scroggs writes: "Why Paul included it may well be his insistence that the false world is lived in equally by women as well as men." [23]

Now, what does it mean to say that they "exchanged" natural relations for those against nature? Does that imply a volitional act, and if so, then could we not argue that Paul has nothing to say to those who are "naturally" or innately homosexual? Paul is not here talking about individuals, but is characterizing the fallen condition of the Gentile world. The whole section from verses 23 through 32 is structured around the verbs "exchange" (for humans) and "giving over" (for God):

Humanity exchanged the glory of God for images (verse 23). Therefore God gave over humanity to impurity, to dishonoring their bodies (verse 24).

Humanity exchanged the worship of God for idolatry (verse 25). Therefore God gave over humanity to dishonorable passions (verse 26). Humanity exchanged natural relations for

unnatural (verses 26b-27). Since people did not acknowledge God, God gave them over to a base mind and improper conduct (verse 28). [24]

Paul is thus not speaking here of individuals, but of the behavior of non-Christian Gentiles as a whole. As Arland Hultgren points out in his response to the 1993 draft on human sexuality [25], "all the indicative verbs from verse 22 through 27 are in past tense (aorists), as though Paul is speaking of something that happened long ago in some primeval time." [26]

Thus the whole section from verse 18 on is couched in what Hays calls mythico-historical language, in which the whole pagan world is implicated. Paul's "exchange of truth for a lie," verse 25, is his way of expressing the primordial sin that continues as the fundamental stance of humanity. The charge is a corporate indictment of pagan society, not a narrative about any one individual. [27]

If the reference is to the fallen condition of humanity, how can those who engage in same-sex relations be held accountable? Answer: in the same way all people are held accountable. In Paul there is an ongoing dialectic between the power of Sin with a capital "S" and the participation in that Sin by the individual's own sinning. The key text is Romans 5:12, "Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned." We are, indeed, in bondage to sin (Romans 6:17), but we are still accountable to God for our actions, whatever our sexual feelings are. That is, all people are responsible, according to Paul, for their behavior. To state it differently, orientation is an argument that for Paul is beside the point. His focus is not on the desires themselves but on what people do with their desires or urges. His interest is in actions, and for him same-sex sexual actions are wrong.

It is, by the way, just as incorrect to say that Paul is a heterosexual writing to other heterosexuals as it is to say that he was dealing with homosexuality as an orientation. Those concepts are unknown in Graeco-Roman antiquity. The Graeco-Roman, non-Jewish male over a lifetime might engage in a range of same-gender and cross-gender genital relationships. For Paul the same-gender relationships are by definition wrong.

Verse 27 — "and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error."

Scroggs argues that what is being talked about here is pederasty. In that case, the text would say nothing about relationships between consenting adults. Few scholars agree with Scroggs, however. [28]

Many point to the fact that in verse 26 Paul talks about female same-sex sexual relationships, which certainly did not involve pederasty. Nor does Paul use here any of the technical terms that elsewhere are used for that form of sexual expression. The language of "giving up" is parallel to the "exchanging" of verse 26 and "implies a departure from a divinely intended, originally heterosexual relationship between males and females." [29]

What is the punishment Paul talks about? Some point, especially in light of the AIDS epidemic,

to physical, more particularly, venereal disease; most commentators believe that Paul sees what for him is the distortion of same-sex sexual activity as the punishment itself. [30]

And distortion, for good or ill, is the sense of Paul's language. He styles same-sex sexual activity as *pla/nh*, *plan*, a wandering from what is right.

#### IV. Other Texts and Questions

A. What about the silence of Jesus? Doesn't that indicate that he would accept homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle?

In logic one of the weakest arguments is the argument from silence. The argument, in fact, could just as easily be turned around: since Jesus did not counter the universal condemnation of same sex relations by Jewish society he must have approved it.

I think the best thing we can do is to say that we have no argument here, one way or the other.

B. What about the vision of Peter in Acts 10:9-16 regarding clean and unclean?

The first level of meaning in the vision is that there is no distinction for the Christian between kosher and unkosher food. The second level of meaning in the vision, according to Acts 10, is that the message of Jesus is to go to Gentiles as well as Jews. There is nothing in the passage that talks about "moral inclusivity," a term that occurred in a letter I received from a pastor in Pennsylvania. I think that one has to take an awfully big step to move from potential inclusion of Gentiles as well as Jews to acceptance of same sex relationships. [31]

I honestly don't see how this passage helps us.

C. What about analogies to women in ministry, divorce, and slavery? The church has changed its positions on these matters. Why not same-sex relationships?

Here is a point on which Professor Fretheim and I disagree. In the case of women in ministry, divorce, and slavery, we have within the Bible itself a varied witness. That is, in each case we have passages that conflict with each other. There is no monolithic approach to those issues. In that kind of case the interpreter needs to develop a hermeneutic to adjudicate between the conflicting material. I am unaware of any positive statement in either testament regarding same-sex sexual activity, and so the situation with this issue is different from the others and the analogy breaks down.

#### V. Penultimate Conclusions

Now, what to do with all of this? For the Sacred Cow people there is immediate application of the biblical text to today. Such persons probably have difficulty understanding why the historical study of 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians was necessary and why I raised questions about the usefulness of those texts for contemporary decision-making. For the White Elephant folks this entire presentation is pretty much beside the point. In general, they believe, biblical ethics do not

speak to life today, and certainly these texts don't. For those who understand the Bible as a Source of Identity and Dialogue Resource, these texts also seem to have limited usefulness, if any at all. Although Hays, Thiselton, and Jewett would say otherwise, these sisters and brothers believe that the texts don't deal with the identity of the church and, together with the White Elephant people, they simply do not think that these texts deal with situations in antiquity that have any real analogy to life today. And those who see the Bible as a Source of Principles might suggest that we look to a generalized love ethic: "do the loving thing." That vague statement often results in a laissez-faire attitude toward ethics. In any event, Principles proponents want to avoid specific ethical directives and judgments such as the ones found in our passages.

When I was a member of the Panel on Human Sexuality that was appointed in the wake of the first draft of a proposed ELCA statement on human sexuality, together with other panel members I was asked to come early or stay late each time we had a meeting in order to read congregational and individual responses to the draft. From that experience I would say that it is clear that in the ELCA we have a good number of people who take the Sacred Cow position. But I would also say that the largest number of responses seemed to fall into the Traditional category, that is, people who believe that biblical prescriptions concerning family life and human sexuality do remain valid for the Christian community unless they are clearly opposed by Jesus or the rest of the New Testament witness. Most of the current scholarly "action," if you will, is among those of us who are Neo-Traditional in approach. While my roots are clearly in the Traditional category, I do most of my own research within the Neo-Traditional framework, as do people with very differing conclusions on our topic such as Furnish and Hays.

So for me as a traditionalist/neo-traditionalist, there is a shorter line between then and now because of my understanding of the original historical situation, namely, that not all the texts deal with pederasty or prostitution but in fact at least one and perhaps two deal with consenting adults. I think that Paul was dealing with a situation much closer to our reality that some others would allow [32].

And for me as a traditionalist/neo-traditionalist the theological basis of Paul's argument in Romans 1, rooted in the Old Testament and in his understanding of God as creator, indicates the fundamental nature of his comments.

At the same time I have my questions, too.

Even if one assumes with Paul that same-sex sexual activity is a manifestation of sin (which obviously many people would not agree to), given the broken world in which we live how can Christians bring the most order and justice out of less than ideal situations? In other words, is it possible to glorify God in sexually active gay and lesbian relationships (1 Corinthians 6:20)?

What does it mean that immediately following what Paul says in Romans 1:26-27 he lists twenty-one other examples of inappropriate behavior? Do we not need to talk about how what Paul says about same-sex relationships fits with or doesn't fit with the rest of his list? In other words, even granting that same-sex relations are his primary example, do we pay the same attention to his other examples as we do to same-sex relations? Why or why not?

Is it possible for Christians to affirm the understanding of Romans 1:26-27 that I have outlined without concluding that condemnation and persecution should result? I think so. In my work as a member of the two churchwide panels that dealt with this issue in the 1990s, for example, I am the one who formulated and pushed the inclusion of a recommendation that the synodical bishops send a clear and immediate message of reconciliation and hope to gay and lesbian people and their families — which indeed you did do.

Is it possible for Christians to differ radically on this particular issue and yet carry on the dialogue in a way that respects people as individuals as well as respects their thoughts, feelings, and opinions? I think so, and I have seen Christians all over this nation do that. Romans 14:1-15:13 provide us good models on how to welcome each other in the Lord even — perhaps especially — when we differ.

## VI. Final Comments

Finally, three concluding comments.

First, as we continue to struggle with this issue — and all others, for that matter — we need to remember that all of us, whatever our sexual orientation or practice, says Paul, "have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). "There is no one who is righteous, not even one." (Romans 3:10). And I guess that includes you and me. Or, as Paul says in Romans 2:1, immediately after the section on same-sex relationships, "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things." The need for salvation and the mode of salvation are the same for all people, whatever our sexual practices are or are not.

Second, the only way we are made into the people of God is by God's gracious gift of baptism. Our morality does not save us. That is not to say that it is not important, but it is to say that God saves us, not our moral perfection, or our supposed moral perfection. Thus welcoming others, including for straight people the welcoming of gay and lesbian people, is not an issue, frankly: it is a given.

Third, I do not think that one can retain both Paul's views in Romans (and perhaps in 1 Corinthians) and same-sex sexual relationships. Many people on the acceptance side recognize that. Two days after my Lutheran interview appeared, I spent an intense two hours with a gay pastor. He eventually told me that he agreed with my interpretation of Paul. He simply rejected Paul. My fundamental question is how full acceptance can be supported from Scripture and, more particularly, what do people do with Romans 1 — other than rejecting it, which I in good conscience as an ordained pastor of this church and a Professor of New Testament cannot do.

The history of the Lutheran Church shows that, when and if the biblical and theological ducks are lined up, people will make all kinds of moves — weekly communion and women's ordination being just two recent examples. I do not see those ducks lined up yet. My greatest fear, by the way, is not at all the ordination of practicing homosexuals or the approval of homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle. My greatest fear is that we will make those decisions on grounds other than clear biblical and theological convictions.

I have shared with you my struggles over this issue. I wish that my studies had led me elsewhere, to be frank. The first time I finished preparing a public presentation on this topic, I told my wife I was really discouraged. "Why?" she asked. "Because part of me really wants my conclusions to come out differently, but that isn't what the texts say."

Which is to say that my reading today stands against what I would like at many levels to conclude. But my dilemma is part of what I think it means to be under the authority of the Word and part of what it means to allow the Word to address us from outside our own wishes.

Two concluding observations, both from Richard Hays of Duke Divinity School.

a) "Any discussion of the normative application of Romans 1 must not neglect the powerful impact of Paul's rhetorical reversal in Romans 2:1: all of us stand 'without excuse' ... before God, Jews and Gentiles alike, heterosexuals and homosexuals alike. Thus, Romans 1 should decisively undercut any self-righteous condemnation of homosexual behavior. Those who follow the church's tradition by upholding the authority of Paul's teaching against the morality of homosexual acts must do so with due humility ... ." [33]

b) "Likewise, those who decide that the authority of Paul's judgment against homosexuality is finally outweighed by other considerations ought to do so with a due sense of the gravity of their choice. The theological structure in which Paul places his indictment of relations 'contrary to nature' is a weighty one indeed, and it is not explicitly counterbalanced by anything in Scripture or in Christian tradition. Arguments in favor of acceptance of homosexual relations find their strongest warrants in empirical investigations and in contemporary experience. Those who defend the morality of homosexual relationships within the church may do so only by conferring upon these warrants an authority greater than the direct authority of Scripture and tradition, at least with respect to this question." [34]

May those words, from a traditionalist/neo-traditionalist who helped nurse a gay friend who was dying of AIDS, remind us of the balance and respect that should characterize this church's ongoing discernment of the will of God in this as in all matters.

Footnotes:

[1] Paul Jersild, *Spirit Ethics: Scripture and the Moral Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 134.

[2] Walter F. Taylor, Jr., "Homosexuality — Is there a biblical view?" *The Lutheran* (July 1993), 20-23. Reprinted in *Canada Lutheran* (September 1993), 20

[3] Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues* (Second ed., revised; Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 11-27.

[4] *Ibid.*, 14.

[5] For more on this background, see Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*:

Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); and Furnish, 52-82.

[6] See especially John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), and David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988).

[7] Boswell, 84.

[8] See Christian Wolff, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther* (Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 7; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1996), 119-20, in an excursus on Paul's assessment of homosexuality.

[9] On the questions of date and authorship, see Walter F. Taylor, Jr., "1 and 2 Timothy, Titus," in *The Deutero-Pauline Letters: Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus* (ed. Gerhard Krodel; Proclamation Commentaries; Revised ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 59-93.

[10] The term may well be derived from the relevant Leviticus texts. The Greek of the Septuagint in Leviticus 20:13 is very close to the Greek used here, which is to say that the Pauline tradition and Paul himself (next passage, which uses the same term) appear to presuppose and reaffirm the condemnation of homosexual acts found in the Holiness Code.

[11] Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 83, 87-89. So also Victor Gold in "Now The Silence Breaks: Toward A Pastoral Understanding of Homosexuality" (Chicago: National Lutheran Campus Ministry, n.d.), 14, by implication.

[12] "Now the Silence Breaks" thinks the reference is to anal intercourse, but without any texts quoted.

[13] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (The New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 442, based on the work of C. H. Dodd). See also his view that the basis of the 1 Corinthians passage is not Graeco-Roman thought but the Old Testament (pp. 440-47).

[14] *Ibid.*, 447, 451.

[15] Ernst Koosemann, *Commentary on Romans* (trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 47.

[16] Paul J. Achtemeier, *Romans* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 40.

[17] On the need for effective examples to draw "from everyday experience and derive their argumentative force from shared opinion or prejudice," see Robert Jewett, "The Social Context and Implications of Homoerotic References in Romans 1:24-27," in *Homosexuality, Science,*

and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture" (ed. David L. Balch; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 230-31. Jewett goes on to say that Paul had no need to prove the evils of the behavior against which he writes, since that was a view his readers shared with him.

[18]Scroggs, 117.

[19]See Jewett, 233, and the extensive literature cited there.

[20]For a denial of the Genesis connection see Victor Paul Furnish, "The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Texts in Context," in *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Jeffrey S. Siker, ed.; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 18-35. For Hays the reference earlier in the passage to God as Creator would certainly evoke memories of the creation stories in Genesis 1-3 (Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996], 386), which in turn leads to God's creative intent for male-female relations.

[21]Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (Anchor Bible 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 276: "Paul sees homosexual conduct as a symbol of the perversion stemming from idolatry. For him it is a way in which human beings refuse to acknowledge the manifestation of God's activity in creation. ... Homosexual behavior is the sign of human rebellion against God, an outward manifestation of the inward and spiritual rebellion."

[22]For David Fredrickson, in a closely argued and thoroughly researched article, the language of "against nature" is closely allied with Graeco-Roman culture's common perspective on erotic relations (David E. Fredrickson, "Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24-27: Paul and the Philosophic Critique of Eros," in *Homosexuality, Science, and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture* [ed. David L. Balch; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 197-222). The language of "against nature" is thoroughly Graeco-Roman; its home is in the philosophical discussions, and it does not have a clear theological basis. Thus, "Romans 1:24-27 is not an attack on homosexuality as a violation of divine law but a description of the human condition informed by the philosophic rejection of passionate love" (p. 208). His work is extremely insightful, but he plays only one side of the Pauline "fence." Paul is a figure that must always be understood from several perspectives at once. By not looking at Paul from a Jewish perspective Fredrickson has cut him off from a major source of his ethical thinking, namely, the Old Testament. The next article in the volume, by Robert Jewett, illustrates what can be learned when we bring in the Jewish-Old Testament background of Paul as well as the Graeco-Roman (see p. 224, e.g.). The influence of intertextuality (the impact of one biblical text on another) needs to be taken into account when interpreting Romans 1. In addition, Thiselton reminds us that sheer use of Graeco-Roman philosophical terminology does not alter the theological framework within which Paul uses that language (p. 444). Paul's ethical thought is thoroughly rooted in the Old Testament and, in fact, he posits a distinctive Christian identity and lifestyle over against that of the Graeco-Roman world (pp. 446-47).

[23]Scroggs, 115. On opposition to lesbian behavior in antiquity see Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 31-186.



[24]Arland J. Hultgren, "Being Faithful to the Scriptures: Romans 1:26 27 as a Case in Point," in A Collection of Resources from ELCA Academicians and Synodical Bishops to "The Church and Human Sexuality: A Lutheran Perspective" (Chicago: Division for Church in Society, ELCA, 1994), 151.

[25]"First draft" and "draft" in this paper refer to the October 1993 proposed ELCA social statement entitled The Church and Human Sexuality: A Lutheran Perspective.

[26] Hultgren, 152. See also Koosemann, 47.

[27]Richard B. Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1" Journal of Religious Ethics 14 (1986), 200. At the same time, the "exchanging" language of vss. 23 and 26 provides "a powerful rhetorical link between the rebellion against God and the "shameless acts" (1:27) that are themselves both evidence and consequence of that rebellion" (Hays, Moral Vision, 387).

[28]Scroggs, 116. For a critique of Scroggs' position see Jewett, 234-35 and note 75.

[29]Jewett, 236.

[30]See, e.g., *ibid.*, 238.

[31]For that matter, in verses 34-35 of Acts 10 Peter says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." So the understanding of Acts 10 of the vision includes "doing what is right," which, for good or ill, takes us right back to the starting point of whether same-sex sexual activity is "right" or not.

[32]See also the challenging comments by Jewett, 240-41.

[33]Hays, "Relations," 210.

[34]*Ibid.*, 211.

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