

**Robert A. J. Gagnon, “Does the Bible Regard Same-Sex Intercourse as Intrinsically Sinful?” in *Christian Sexuality: Normative and Pastoral Principles* (ed. Russell E. Saltzman; Minneapolis: Kirk House, 2003), 106-55.**

**Author’s note (2/24/15):** This article is posted online with permission of the publisher. It is a critique of an article by Prof. Mark Allan Powell, “The Bible and Homosexuality,” in *Faithful Conversations: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality* (ed. J. M. Childs; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 19-40. Of special ongoing relevance in this critique, in addition to the discussion of the use of the creation texts for the church debate on homosexual practice, is the section treating ancient theories positing a biological basis for some homoerotic attraction and their relation both to Paul’s views and contemporary debate (pp. 140-52). This remains my most extensive discussion of the “new knowledge” orientation-argument. The notes to this article designated by N[#] can be found online at: <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/homoPowellRespNotes.pdf> or <http://www.robagnon.net/ChristianSexualityNotes.htm>.



## **Chapter Eight**

### **Does the Bible Regard Same-Sex Intercourse as Intrinsically Sinful?**

By Robert A. J. Gagnon

Does one have to disregard the clear witness in Scripture in order to approve of some homosexual practice? Or can one heed Scripture’s anti-homosex, pro-complementarity witness even as one finds ways to accommodate some homosexual unions? In short, can Scripture’s normative opposition to homosexual practice be combined with a policy of “exceptions”?

This is an important question for persons who regard the Bible as the church’s supreme authority in matters of faith and practice and yet wonder whether the church should make some provision for homosexual relationships. The answer to this question hinges on at least three other considerations:

- (1) Does the Bible depict homosexual practice as intrinsically sinful or as normally sinful?
- (2) In particular, do the creation stories in Genesis 1-2 preclude, as a matter of course, all same-sex intercourse? Or can they be faithfully interpreted as witnesses for committed homosexual unions?
- (3) Do we have significantly new knowledge today about “homosexual orientation” to warrant an adjustment — though not rejection — of Scripture’s stance against homosexual practice?

The purpose of this essay is to address these crucial questions.

*Why this essay?* To be sure, I have dealt with these three questions in other work, most notably in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*:

*Texts and Hermeneutics* (Abingdon, 2001) and in my more recent and shorter synthesis, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Fortress, 2003). So why write this article? There are two answers to that question.

One answer is simply that more needs to be said about each of these three questions. Question (1) is important enough to merit a more focused treatment. As regards questions (2) and (3) I have done more extensive work since the publication of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. Owing to space constraints, these materials could not be adequately incorporated into *Homosexuality and the Bible*. Readers will get from this article the most extensive critique to date of the “orientation argument” (question 3) so often employed by prohomosex apologists. They will also get from this author a much fuller presentation of the relevance of the creation texts to the homosexuality issue.

The second reason for this essay is that a new article has come out that makes the case for exceptions. The article, “The Bible and Homosexuality,” is by Mark Allan Powell, professor of New Testament at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, a well-published scholar who takes Scripture seriously. His essay appears in a book that “was initiated by the ELCA seminary presidents in response to a churchwide mandate” to study the feasibility of blessing homosexual unions: *Faithful Conversations: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality* (ed. James M. Childs, Jr.; Fortress Press, 2003; pp. 19-40 = Powell’s article). Other scholars, such as Martti Nissinen and Bernadette Brooten, have made more detailed and sweeping cases for approval of homosexual behavior. But Powell’s article will probably be more influential, certainly within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, for three reasons. (1) It appears as the only essay written by a biblical scholar in a book being promoted as a study guide for ELCA churches. (2) It is a concise, well organized, and easy read. (3) In acknowledging that the biblical prohibitions of homosexual practice cannot be dismissed, Powell’s article makes enough criticisms of prohomosex readings of Scripture to come across to some as a moderate or centrist reading. As I will show, this would be a mistaken perception, but it is a perception that nonetheless has to be reckoned with. In sum, unlike some other prohomosex treatments, Powell’s has a strong chance of appealing to the middle of the church, with disastrous consequences.

Because Powell makes the best argument for “exceptions” to a normative policy of opposition to same-sex intercourse, I will use his article as my main conversation partner for addressing the three questions raised above.<sup>1</sup> It is not necessary for readers of this article to read Powell’s essay in order to understand *my* argument. This is not to say

that I am using Powell's article as a mere foil for my own points, or that I am unconcerned about how accurately I represent his positions. On the contrary, readers of my online<sup>2</sup> material will see from section I a very close reading of Powell's article. Rather, I am asserting that the positions to which I am responding are laid out with enough detail to enable the reader to follow the discussion without Powell's essay in hand. Obviously, if readers want to evaluate for themselves whether I have correctly understood Powell's argument, they will need to read both Powell's essay and my online<sup>3</sup> material. But the three main sections of my essay can be evaluated in their own right.<sup>4</sup>

Although this essay interacts with the work of a Lutheran scholar (Powell) and is part of this volume addressing the current discussion in the ELCA concerning homosexuality, the concerns raised in this essay transcend distinctively Lutheran issues. In dialoguing on the homosexuality issue in different mainline Christian denominations, it never ceases to amaze me how often prohomosex apologists cite their specific denominational heritage as allowing them to circumvent Scripture's strong witness to a heterosexual prerequisite. The claim usually begins with a line like: "Unlike persons from other denominations, we [fill in the blank: Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Mennonites, etc.] interpret Scripture in such-and-such a way." The fact is, there are no interpretive methods or theological concerns, distinctive to any mainline Christian denomination, which lead to a prohomosex position. There is nothing distinctively Lutheran about Powell's presentation; nor, for that matter, is there anything distinctively Presbyterian about mine. This is not a sectarian debate.

### I. Does Powell advocate exceptions?

The full online<sup>4</sup> section provides a detailed analysis of Powell's presentation, showing that Powell is insistent about three key points that invariably lead to the personal aside expressed at the end of his article.

1. While the Bible depicts homosexual practice as "normally contrary to God's will" and "intrinsically unnatural," it does not view such behavior as "intrinsically sinful." By "not intrinsically sinful" Powell means that *approval* of some homosexual activity is possible, at least hypothetically (pp. 21-22, 26, 28, 35).

2. No one can know whether Paul would have disapproved of the practice of same-sex intercourse by a Christian who (a) had a relatively exclusive and fixed homosexual orientation; (b) experienced a deep personal dissatisfaction with celibacy; and (c) acted in the context of a loving and committed "life partnership" (pp. 19, 31, 34-35).

3. To insist on an absolute ban of all homosexual relationships is to “fly in the face of Scripture” because: (a) there are “thousands of homosexual Christians for whom neither therapy nor celibacy appears viable”; and (b) Genesis 2:18 allegedly tells us that it is God’s will “for all people to have the opportunity of sharing life with a partner” (pp. 34, 36).

Given these intermediate suppositions, it is not surprising that Powell reaches the following conclusion: “I believe that . . . exceptions to the prohibited behavior must be granted in some instances to enable homosexual people to experience life as abundantly as possible” (p. 39). The gist of what he says previously more or less requires this belief. As we shall see, it is not so much Scripture as Powell’s personal belief that shapes the three suppositions cited above.

## II. What the church would be doing in granting exceptions

Powell begins the last section of his article by “clarifying what the Church would *not* be doing” if it sanctioned “some relationships between some homosexual persons who meet certain criteria defined by the Church (for instance, public commitment to a lifelong, monogamous union).” The Church, Powell claims, would not be: (1) “endorsing homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle,” (2) “redefining marriage,” (3) “condoning any specific sex acts,” or (4) “discrediting the views or efforts of those who encourage celibacy or therapy as ‘first options’ for gay and lesbian persons” (pp. 36-37).

The full online<sup>5</sup> section shows that, if the church made thousands of so-called “exceptions” to a “usual policy” against homosexual behavior, it would indeed be doing all four things that Powell denies it would be doing. The term *exceptions* would become meaningless because the “usual policy” would apply only to those persons not particularly oriented toward violating it. On a pragmatic level, it would be impossible to know in advance of death what individuals might have an allegedly unalterable homosexual orientation. And what would count as an “exclusive” orientation when nearly all homosexuals experience some degree of heterosexual attraction at some point in life? What sense would it make to require a “public commitment to a lifelong, monogamous union” when no more than five percent of homosexual unions sanctioned by the church would turn out to be *both* lifelong *and* monogamous? It is also politically naïve to think that an initial acceptance of “exceptions” would not lead irresistibly to full acceptance. The church would necessarily redefine marriage. Even Powell makes his case for “exceptions” largely on the basis of an appeal to the Bible’s key mar-

riage text: Genesis 2:18-24. The alternative to such a redefinition is to institutionalize sex outside of marriage. The church will also have to turn a blind eye to the practices that typify homosexual relationships. Certainly, too, a powerful homosexual lobby in the church is not going to accept any policy on celibacy or therapy as "first options" for homosexuals. In fact, a policy of "exceptions" would embolden prohomosexual forces to coercive indoctrination and intimidation in order to stamp out any last vestiges of "prejudice" against same-sex intercourse. Any remaining holdouts in the church would be treated as the moral equivalent of racists and disciplined accordingly. Incidentally, a plan for "local option" would produce the same adverse effects as a plan for "exceptions."

### **III. Interpretive issues: core values, structural complementarity, and the burden of proof**

In the full online<sup>6</sup> section, I discuss the criteria for determining what constitutes a core value for Scripture: a value that is pervasively, strongly, and absolutely held in opposition to broader cultural trends. Such a value is the heterosexual ("other-sexual") prerequisite for sexual unions. That Powell could justify exceptions to Scripture's prohibition of homosexual practice by an appeal to Jesus' interpretation of Sabbath law shows how much Powell underestimates the significance of this prerequisite.

The Bible's prohibition of incest, and particularly sex with one's mother, provides the closest analogue to the prohibition of same-sex intercourse. It illustrates the utter gravity of maintaining minimum standards for structural complementarity in sexual mergers. Powell's discussion of "the gift of sexuality," focusing as it does on durable intimacy, overlooks this crucial dimension (p. 21). "Sexual orientation" does not take precedence over the matter of too much structural identity. Surely Powell would not want to sanction a man-mother union even if there were an "orientation" involved.

Powell rightly states that anyone who wants to argue for exceptions to Scripture's prohibition of same-sex intercourse has to meet a "heavy burden of proof" (pp. 28, 35). Doesn't this require Powell to *assume*, apart from unambiguous historical evidence to the contrary, that Paul would not have made any exceptions for "the redeemed Christian who continues to have homosexual impulses or to engage in homosexual activity that is neither promiscuous nor exploitative" (p. 31)? As it is, Powell argues for exceptions without having supplied such evidence.

#### IV. The male-female prerequisite in the Genesis creation stories

##### A. Powell's reading of Genesis 2:18-24

Powell does not dismiss the significance of Genesis 2:18-24 for the procomplementarity side of the discussion. However, he truncates its value for a "procomp" position while using it as the key proof text for promoting exceptions consistent with a prohomosex perspective. According to Powell (pp. 21, 29, 32), Genesis 2:18-25 tells us that:

- (1) God designed humans at creation for heterosexual relations.
- (2) *But* this design is only the "normal state of affairs."
- (3) Homosexual relations are a departure from God's design.
- (4) *But* homosexual relations are not necessarily sinful.
- (5) All references to homosexual acts in the Bible are negative.
- (6) *But* God declares that it is "not good" for humans to be alone. It is God's will that all people have the opportunity of being in a sexually intimate, lifelong partnership with another person.

In this point-counterpoint presentation of Genesis 2:18-25, I would identify points (1), (3), and (5) as accurate, but points (2), (4), and (6) as either misleading or inaccurate. The best way of showing this is simply to give my own understanding of the import of the Genesis creation stories and then come back and explain where my understanding differs from that of Powell.

##### B. The male-female prerequisite in Genesis 1:26-28

Let us begin with Genesis 1:26-28 which, surprisingly, gets almost no play in Powell's article (N1).

<sup>26</sup>And God said, "Let us make an *adam* (an earthling, humankind, man) in our image, in accordance with our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish . . . birds . . . cattle . . . wild animals. . . and over every crawling thing that crawls on the earth."

<sup>27</sup>And God created the *adam* in his image,  
in the image of God he created it (or: him),  
male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup>And God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish...the birds...and every living thing that crawls on the earth."

What does this text contribute to a discussion of the Bible and homosexual practice? I see at least four points here.

1. Genesis 1:27 brings into close connection creation "in God's image" and creation as "male and female." *If* sex is to be had, the image of

God manifests itself in a complementary male-female union. This is different from asserting that individuals *must* engage in sexual intercourse in order to manifest God's image. Rather, there are ways of having sex that would efface the image of God stamped on humans and ways of having sex that would enhance that image. The former would include bestiality, same-sex intercourse, and adultery; the latter — certainly in Jesus' understanding of this text (Mark 10:6-9) — lifelong monogamous unions with someone of the opposite sex. In the sexual dimension of life humans are "angled" or "faceted" expressions of the image and likeness of God, "male and female." They have integrity or wholeness as God's image, independent of sexual activity. Yet, when they engage in sexual activity, they engage another in their particularity, as only one incomplete part of a two-faceted sexual whole. Ignoring this particularity effaces that part of the divine image stamped on human sexuality.

2. One such complementary dimension concerns the capacity to procreate, though it is not likely that the narrator limited complementarity to this one function. For example, the idea that P would have viewed an infertile male-female sexual union as the moral equivalent of a homoerotic union is, from the vantage point of historical-critical study, preposterous. It is worth noting also that Jesus interpreted the creation of male and female in Genesis 1:27 as the basis not merely for procreative acts but also for the entire holistic joining of two into one flesh (Gen 2:24).

3. The narrator of Genesis 1 gives special attention to issues of structural compatibility, specifically to ordering according to various "kinds" (vv. 11-12, 21, 24-25; cf. 6:20; 7:14; N2). Such attention precludes any openness on the narrator's part toward same-sex intercourse.

4. The story of the human creation in Genesis 1:26-31 stresses compatibility, not male dominance. "Male and female" *combined* express God's image. Both are commanded to manage God's creation (N3).

### C. The male-female prerequisite in Genesis 2:18-24

Genesis 2:18-24 brings the male-female requirement into even sharper relief than Genesis 1:26-28.

<sup>18</sup>And Yahweh God said, "It is not good for the *adam* to be alone; I will make for him a helper as his counterpart (*ezer kenegdo*)." <sup>19</sup>And Yahweh God formed from the ground (*adamah*) every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the *adam* . . . <sup>20</sup> but for the *adam* there was not found a helper as his counterpart.

<sup>21</sup>And Yahweh God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the *adam*, and he slept; and he took one of his sides (or: ribs) and closed up its place

with flesh. <sup>22</sup>And Yahweh God built the side (or: rib, *tsela*) that he had taken from the *adam* into a woman and brought her to the *adam*.

<sup>23</sup>And the *adam* said, "This at last is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh; to this one shall be given the name 'woman' (*ishshah*) for from man (*ish*) this one was taken."

<sup>24</sup>Therefore a man (*ish*) shall leave his father and his mother and become attached (or: joined, united) to his woman/wife (*ishshah*) and the two shall become one flesh.

What is the image here? The term *tsela*, traditionally rendered "rib," is nowhere else used of part of the human body. Normally, it denotes the "side" of an object. Of note is the interpretation of Rabbi Samuel bar Nahman (third century A.D.):

"When God created Adam, he created him facing both ways; then he sawed him in two and made two backs, one for each figure."  
(*Genesis Rabbah* 8:1)

The image presented in Genesis 2:21-22 appears to be that of an originally binary human, or one sexually undifferentiated, who is split down the side to form two sexually differentiated counterparts. Marriage is pictured as a *reconstitution* of the two constituent parts, male and female, that were the products of the splitting.

In this depiction same-sex erotic unions are precluded as a matter of course. Why? The reason is that the only differentiation created by the splitting is the two sexes, male and female. Accordingly, the most essential requirement of human sexual relations – the only one that restores the original sexual unity – is that there be a male and a female to effect this *re-union*. "Becoming one flesh" is not just about intimacy, romance, raising a family, and generally sharing one's life with another in a lifelong union (*contra* Powell). Yes, it is those things but it also more: It is about *reuniting* male and female into a sexual whole. This *reunion* cannot come about artificially, that is, through the contorted gender nonconformity of one or the other partner. Rather, it transpires truly, by means of the *remerging* of divided constituent parts: essential male and essential female. Neither party need, or can, compromise gender integrity to effect the *reunion*. God specifically designed men and women for a holistic fittedness in terms of anatomy, physiology, distinctive stimulation patterns, and relational expectations. A same-sex sexual partner does not supply the missing sexual complement, no matter how hard he or she tries. Authorization of homoerotic unions requires a different kind of creation account – something like the comical story of human origins spun by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* (189C-193D), in which an original man-male, female-female, and male-female are each



split down the side and thereafter long for the other half (see N4 for a critique of Terence Fretheim's prohomosex reading of Genesis 2:18-25).

As with Genesis 1:26-28, Genesis 2:18-24 is not a text about keeping women down. It is not about misogyny. Adam yearns to rejoin, in one-flesh union, with his other half, his sexual "counterpart" and "helper."

#### D. "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus"

Our brief review of the implications of the Genesis creation stories gives me boldness to go out on a limb and say: Men and women are different – significantly so (N5). That there is a widespread recognition of major male-female differences, not only in anatomy but also in a host of interpersonal dealings, is evident from the popularity of the slogan in the heading above.

An immediate and obvious example of sexual differentiation, apart from complementary anatomy and procreative function, arises in the area of sexual stimulation patterns. For example, the simple fact that women on average manufacture only about one-seventh the amount of the sex-hormone testosterone each day that men do accounts for significant differences between men and women, such as the intensity of the sex-drive and the kind and amount of interpersonal communication needed. Men are more visually stimulated, more genitally focused, and more easily aroused. In a classic psychological study that has been replicated many times over, male and female college students were recruited to approach persons of the opposite sex and ask, among other things, "Would you go to bed with me *tonight*?" Seventy-five percent of the males said "yes," as compared to none of the females. Among those of both sexes who responded "no," males tended to be apologetic while females were often offended (N7).

Of course, the great laboratory for examining male-female differences in action is the homosexual community (N8). In what ways does male homosexual behavior differ from female homosexual behavior? Relative to female homosexuals, male homosexuals have much higher rates of:

- Sex-partners
- "Open" unions
- Deviant sexual behavior, including: anal-oral contact, fisting, group sex, threesomes, bath-house encounters, prostitution, and anonymous sex
- Sexually transmitted disease

Even nonconformist homosexual men – flamboyantly effeminate men – tend to act, in the end, like men as regards patterns of sexual stimulation.

What about female homosexuality? On the whole women have higher, and more holistic, intimacy demands for sexual relationships. An example will illustrate. Soon after being married, an acquaintance of mine said to me, "Yesterday I washed and waxed the kitchen floor for my wife and later that night we had great lovemaking. Help me out here: What's the connection?" I assured him that his wife probably found nothing sexually arousing about Johnson Floor Wax. Rather, what aroused her was his concrete expression of care and concern for matters of interest to her. "But," he responded, "I don't need her to wax the floor to be aroused – unless, of course, she is doing it scantily clad." Exactly. Therein lays a qualitative and quantitative male-female difference. It is not a night-and-day difference. Men can be aroused by expressions of intimacy that go deeper than the mere sight of an attractive female body, just as women can be aroused by the appearance of the male body. It is a matter of degree and frequency. Similarly, there is probably a small percentage of men getting therapy for the fact that their wife does not communicate her innermost feelings often enough. For the vast majority of couples, however, communication problems are a recurring complaint of the woman. In the context of a relational give-and-take between a man and a woman, higher expectations for personal investment in the quality of the relationship, typically associated with the female partner, can have a salutary effect in deepening male commitment to the relationship. At the same time, the male temperament can moderate some unrealistic expectations in the female temperament and provide a healthy corrective to an over-identification of quality-of-relationship concerns with personal self-esteem. When the "masculine corrective" is absent, one gets the kind of problems that appear in female homosexual relationships: (1) relationships of slightly shorter duration than even male homosexual relationships, on average; and (2) a higher incidence of mental illness issues (e.g., bouts with depression) associated with relationship deficiencies or failures.

At this place of the discussion we are beginning to drift into negative side effects of homosexual behavior, which is hard not to do when one talks about why homosexual practice is wrong. My main points, however, are:

- Man and woman complement each other sexually.
- Holiness in sex is not just about separation: it is about completion and wholeness.
- There is something wrong when a person perceives union with a sexual same as completion of the sexual self. The integrity of the sexual

self is denied. Sexual gaps are not filled and the extremes of each sex are not moderated.

There is a great irony in the propaganda put out by pro-homosex advocacy groups. On the one hand, they often deny the significance of sexual differentiation for purposes of mate selection: What does it matter, they ask, if a person chooses a male sex-partner or a female sex-partner? On the other hand, homosexuals with a relatively exclusive attraction to members of the same sex tacitly affirm the significance of sexual differentiation. Why are "category 6" (exclusively homosexual) males not attracted, say, to "butch" females? Why are "category 6" females not attracted to effeminate men? Could there be something distinctively female and something distinctively male that transcend cultural stereotypes?

The bottom line is this: *Persons attracted to same sex are erotically stimulated by what they already are. This is sexual narcissism and/or self-deception.* It is a sexual desire either for one's self or for what one wishes to be but, in fact, already is. It is sin.

#### **E. The Genesis prerequisite in canonical context**

Confirmation for this structuralist reading of Genesis 1 and 2 (N9) comes from links elsewhere in the canon, particularly in (1) other texts from the same literary strands; and (2) reuse of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 by Jesus and Paul.

1. *Relevant texts by the same narrator.* Literary critics generally agree that Genesis 2:18-24 belongs to the same source material ("J," from the "Yahwist") as the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:4-11) and the story of Ham's act against Noah (Gen 9:20-27). Like many, Powell dismisses the relevance of the Sodom narrative because it allegedly "speak[s] only of the sin of homosexual rape and say[s] nothing at all about consensual relations between persons of the same sex" (p. 23).

But how does one know this? The narrative does not tell us that the male-male dimension of the attempted rape had nothing to do with the particular heinousness of the actions of the Sodomite men. The same narrator tells an analogous story in Ham's act against Noah. Many (e.g., von Rad, Nissinen, Wold, myself) have made a case that this story is about Ham's *rape* of his father (N10). For illustrative purposes, let us assume for the moment that this is a correct interpretation. Would anyone want to argue that Genesis 9:20-27 "speaks only of the sin of incestuous rape and says nothing at all about consensual relations between a man and his father?" Obviously such a conclusion would be prepos-

terous. The incestuous dimension, to say nothing of the dimension of same-sex intercourse, clearly ratchets up the dimension of depravity for this ancestor of the Canaanites. Incest is wrong regardless of whether it is coerced or consensual. In short, Genesis 9:20-27 is a “kitchen sink” story of ultimate Canaanite depravity. The ancestor of the Canaanites not only commits rape but rape of one of his parents (incest), and not only so but also rape of his same-sex parent, his father (same-sex intercourse). It is not mere coincidence that Leviticus 18 opens and ends its list of sex-laws (incest, male-male intercourse, etc.) with a warning not to commit the same sexual offenses that the Canaanites had committed. Sex with one’s parent is always wrong because it is sexual relations with “the flesh of one’s flesh” (18:6). Male-male intercourse is always wrong because it entails — in Powell’s own words — “doing something with another man that ought properly be done with a woman” (p. 24).

The Sodom narrative is another “kitchen sink” story of Canaanite depravity: not just rape, but gang-rape as severe in hospitality to travelers seeking temporary lodging; and not just this but treating males not as males but as though they were females with an orifice for male penetration. That male-male intercourse per se is a significant compounding factor in the story is evident from many considerations:

- The Yahwist’s story of Ham in Genesis 9:20-27, with its ideological link to Leviticus 18.
- The Yahwist’s story of the creation of woman in Genesis 2:18-24 and its clear portrayal of woman as the one and only sexual “counterpart” for man.
- The probable anti-homosex interpretations of the Sodom story in Ezekiel 16:49-50 (Ezekiel interprets the Sodom narrative through the lens of Holiness Code or something very much like it) and in Jude 7 and 2 Peter 2:7, 10 (N11), to say nothing of a number of anti-homosex interpretations in early Judaism.
- The parallel story of the Levite at Gibeah in Judges 19:22-25, told by a narrator (the “Deuteronomistic Historian”) who elsewhere abhors the receptive homoerotic associations of the *qedeshim* (“homosexual cult prostitutes”).
- The ancient Near Eastern context, which often disparages males who willingly play the role of females in sexual intercourse.
- The implications of the rest of the Old Testament canon, which in any material dealing with sexual relations always presumes the sole and exclusive legitimacy of heterosexual unions.

For the documentation behind the claims made above, I refer readers to other works of mine (N12). In short, if the Sodom narrative is

read contextually — that is, with historical and literary contexts in view — there can be little doubt that this narrative, along with several other Old Testament texts, rejects all male-male intercourse on the grounds of structural discomplementarity. For the narrator the difference between consent and coercion is the difference between a man who willingly dishonors himself by serving as the sexual counterpart to another male and a man who is forcibly dishonored by others.

Coming from the same literary source, the creation story in Genesis 2:18-24 and the Sodom/Ham narratives interpret each other. Genesis 2:18-24 suggests that the Sodom/Ham narratives were not condemning only coercive forms of same-sex intercourse. The Sodom/Ham narratives, in turn, suggest that the narrator of Genesis 2:18-24 really did intend the story to have negative implications for same-sex intercourse.

I have not said anything yet about literary connections with Genesis 1:26-28, commonly identified as the work of the “Priestly Writers” (P). The relationship between P and H (the Holiness Code, Leviticus 17-26) is not clear; but if, as many think, P absorbed H (N13), then P undoubtedly accepted the prohibition of male-male intercourse in Leviticus 18 and 20. Even if the literary relationship between the two works was different, a person would be hard pressed to make a case for any openness on P’s part to homosexual activity, given P’s obvious structuralist tendencies. Certainly, too, the final canonical shaping of the Pentateuch leaves no doubt about the implications of Genesis 1:26-28 for all same-sex intercourse.

2. *Jesus and Paul on the male-female prerequisite in creation.* I will treat Paul in more detail in the next section. Suffice it to say here that lying in the background of Paul’s critique of same-sex intercourse in Romans 1:24-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9 are, respectively, Genesis 1:27 (an intertextual echo) and Genesis 2:24 (explicitly cited in close contextual proximity). Paul understood these two key creation texts to contain an implicit proscriptive component. In establishing that a holistic sexual union requires the remerging of man and woman, the creation texts necessarily proscribe all homoerotic relationships.


What of Jesus? According to Mark 10:2-12, Jesus addressed a question about human sexuality by appealing to Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. It is probably not mere coincidence that both Jesus and Paul latched onto these same two texts as having ultimate significance for defining sexual morality.

<sup>2</sup>And when Pharisees approached, they were asking him if it was permissible for a man to divorce his wife, testing him. <sup>3</sup>And in response he said to them: “What did Moses command you?” <sup>4</sup>And they said: “Moses allowed to write a certificate of divorce and to divorce.”

<sup>5</sup>But Jesus said to them: "With a view to your hardness of heart he wrote to you this command. <sup>6</sup>But from the beginning of creation, 'male and female he made them' (Gen 1:27). <sup>7</sup>'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and will be joined to his wife, <sup>8</sup>and the two will become one flesh' (Gen 2:24). So they are no longer two but one flesh. "What then God has yoked together, let no man separate."

The following points can be culled from this account:

(1) Jesus regarded Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 as normative for defining sexual practice; as prescriptive, not just descriptive. Indeed, Jesus viewed God's will for human sexuality expressed in Genesis 1-2 as having precedence over any subsequent watering down of the Creator's will, even in the Mosaic law. Thus, the concession to male hardness of heart given by Moses — allowance of a male right to divorce — is revoked in favor of the more stringent sex ethical demand implicitly established at creation. Jesus was so intent on prioritizing sexual purity over other considerations that he even declared that a man marrying a divorced woman committed adultery (so the parallel texts in Luke 16:18 and Matthew 5:32; cf. 1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

(2) Although Jesus focused on the indissolubility of marriage, he *presupposed* as the one essential prerequisite that there be a "male and female." Only a "man" and a "woman" are structurally capable of becoming "one flesh" through a sexual union. Of note is the interesting back-to-back linking of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, giving the impression that Jesus understood the "for this reason" introducing 2:24 as alluding to the gender differentiation established in 1:27. <sup>8</sup>*For this reason* — namely, because God made them male and female, complementary sexual beings (1:27) — man and woman may be joined in a permanent one-flesh union (2:24). 

(3) For Jesus, then, the Creator ordained marriage — it is not just a social construct — as a lifelong union of one man and one woman for the purpose of forming an indissoluble sexual whole. Both the Scriptures that Jesus cited with approval and the audience that Jesus addressed — indeed the whole of early Judaism so far as extant evidence indicates — presumed the male-female prerequisite. Jesus clearly agreed.

(4) When Jesus cited Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24 to address the issue of divorce, he was not divesting them of their implicit proscription of all homoerotic behavior. He was narrowing further an already narrowly defined understanding of normative sexuality, drawn in part from these creation stories, to mandate the indissoluble character of marriage as well. Another area where he intensified demands for life-long monogamy was the human heart (so the adultery of the heart say-

ing in Matthew 5:27-28). Jesus was not making lifelong monogamy a more important consideration for sexual relations than the heterosexual dimension. The latter remained for Jesus the unshakeable prime prerequisite for all considerations of fidelity and longevity. Certainly no reasonable person would argue that Jesus prioritized monogamy and permanence over the intra-human and non-incestuous character of normative sexual relationships. Because Jesus' conviction about a male-female prerequisite at creation was shared throughout early Judaism (N14), he could focus on other facets of sexual relationships over which disputes existed in his cultural context (N15).

### F. Implications for Powell's view

We began this section noting that Powell was on target in some remarks about Genesis 2:18-24 and considerably off-target in others. It is now time to expand on these observations.

1. *A prerequisite, not just the "normal state of affairs."* It is not enough to label the other-sexual character of sexual relations in Genesis 1-2 as *the normal state of affairs*. It is a *prerequisite*.

To his credit, Powell stretches the usual meaning of *normal state of affairs* to encompass the notion of God's intent and design at creation — which, in turn, should have led him to drop the weak word *normal* altogether. In the strongest statement of his essay he even goes so far as to say that "the Bible appears to indicate that [intimate, becoming-one] bonds are to be formed between men and women, not between two men or between two women"; and that "homosexual relations are regarded as a departure from God's design" (p. 32). Most people, I think, would understand these statements to mean that homosexual activity is always (necessarily, intrinsically) sinful and thus never to be *approved* under any circumstances.

Yet this is not what Powell means. In his next-to-last summary of the Bible's position he refers to "the biblical perspective . . . that presents *homosexual behavior* as activity that is *normally* contrary to God's will" (p. 36; emphasis mine). This statement is inaccurate. The perspective of Genesis 1-2 — certainly in the view of the narrators and in the view of Jesus and Paul — is that homosexual relations are *always* contrary to God's will because they always violate the heterosexual *prerequisite* for sexual relations established at creation.

In his last summary of the Bible's position Powell states, "The Bible regards the instances of same-sex intercourse *to which it refers* as shameful and degrading acts, unacceptable conduct for God's people" (p. 37; em-

phasis mine). The clause "to which it refers" indicates a potential limit on the Bible's opposition to same-sex intercourse. The following statement, introduced by "on the other hand," presses on that limitation by insisting that God wants homosexual persons to have a "life-partner." However, the creation texts do not provide Powell with a limitation on the mandatory character of the male-female dimension of sexual relations. The male-female requirement is unconditional. Same-sex erotic unions are precluded as a matter of course because the rejoining effected by a sexually intimate bond requires the constituent parts of the splitting: man and woman.

Powell seems to present the male-female prerequisite as an *ideal* for human sexuality (*cf.* p. 35). That is not enough. The attempt to remerge into a sexual whole two persons who are structurally discordant for such a re-merger seriously distorts the gender integrity of the two participants. Sexual intercourse is only for sexual counterparts. Whether or not the participants know it, homoerotic intercourse makes a statement that the participants find sexual completion in one another. The Bible always regards sexual mergers that violate structural prerequisites as extremely serious violations of God's design in creation (man-mother sex and human-animal sex are cases in point). Apart from the requirement that humans limit their sexual mergers to other humans, there is no more basic, or sacred, expectation placed on human sexual activity than the male-female prerequisite. Scripture regards its violation as the ultimate sacrilege against God's design of male and female.

Where Powell gets lost a bit, and might lose his readers, is in his characterization of *heterosexual relationships* as the normal state of affairs (pp. 21, 29, 32). Technically, this is a true statement, so long as one means only that not everyone will enter a sexual relationship. But in the context of discussing the perspective of Genesis 1-2 on homosexual relations it is imprecise and misleading because it does not encapsulate *everything* that the creation texts affirm. Powell thinks that saying "homosexual behavior . . . is normally contrary to God's will" is the flipside of saying that heterosexual relationships are the normal state of affairs. It is not. The latter statement leaves the door open for celibacy, consistent with the biblical perspective; the former requires the conclusion that homosexual relationships are not wrong in all circumstances, inconsistent with the biblical perspective. From a biblical point of view, although it is technically true to say that same-sex intercourse is contrary to the normal state of affairs, it is technically false to claim that same-sex intercourse is contrary *only* to the normal state of affairs. Same-sex inter-



course is contrary *also* to the heterosexual prerequisite for sexual relationships. As such it is *always* contrary to God's will, not just *normally* so.

Any number of analogies would make this clear. If an article came out saying that man-mother sex, human-animal sex, or sex with a pre-pubescent child was contrary to the normal state of affairs, critics would rightly jump all over that claim — not because the claim would be technically false but because it would be false in a *performative* sense. It would imply that man-mother sex, human-animal sex, or sex with a pre-pubescent child was contrary *only* to the normal state of affairs and not necessarily contrary to an absolute prohibition. In not saying enough, the statement would grant license to claims for exceptions and erode resistance to the behavior in general. It would deserve to be condemned as irresponsible.

For this reason Powell's attempt to justify the expression *normal state of affairs* by appealing to other variations of the creation paradigm — celibacy and childlessness — does not work (pp. 21-22). The Bible does not declare celibacy and childlessness to be sin. However, *if sex is to be had*, there are ways of having it that the Bible considers necessarily sinful, and egregiously so. The other two variations from the creation paradigm that Powell cites, polygamy and divorce, are unlike same-sex intercourse in that they are (a) permitted under exceptional circumstances in the Old Testament and, as regards divorce, in the New Testament as well; and, (b) following from this point, were/are not regarded as unnatural acts, at least not on the order of same-sex intercourse. Even given these ameliorating factors, which make polygamy and divorce much less serious offenses than same-sex intercourse, the church today takes a very dim view of repeat offenses. Indeed, it permits no exceptions as regards any form of "plural marriage" in Western culture. Even in third world cultures where polygamy is an accepted practice the church disallows new wives and encourages disengagement from extra wives when children are not involved. As for divorce, the church takes a dim view of even one divorce, to say nothing of multiple divorces. A homoerotic union, however, involves numerous immoral, proactive, and unnatural sexual acts over a long term and without regard for the necessity of repentance.

As we argued in section III, the closest analogy to same-sex intercourse is incest and the particularly extreme form of man-mother incest. There are no exceptions here, not even hypothetical ones. The level of structural sacrilege is too high for any exceptions to be entertained and for any reason.

2. A *sexual complement*, not just an "intimate life-partner." Powell uses another expression that obscures the witness of the creation texts, "intimate life-partner," which he identifies with the quality of "becoming one" in Genesis 2:24 (N16). For example, from pp. 32, 34, 36, 37, and 38 (emphasis mine):

The Bible teaches that it is the will of God for all people to have the opportunity of *sharing life with a partner*, a person with whom they form an intimate bond so as to "become one."

Thousands of homosexual Christians for whom neither therapy nor celibacy appear to be viable options. . . . experience what Paul calls "burning" for a *life-partner*.

The Bible does indicate . . . that it is God's will for individuals to have the opportunity of *sharing their lives with intimate partners* (Gen. 2:18-25). The Church may set limits regarding such partnerships . . . but to insist on limits that deny thousands of people the possibility of such relationships altogether is to fly in the face of scripture.

God does not want homosexual persons (or anyone else) to have to live alone, denied the opportunity of "*becoming one*" with a *life-partner* through an intimate bond of love and devotion.

Do we require homosexual people to sacrifice the experience of *sharing life intimately with a partner* in order to fulfill God's standards of holiness as perfectly as possible?

Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 do affirm that sexual intimacy, partnership, and lifelong commitment are essential ingredients of the bond described therein. But Genesis 2:18-24 puts forward a much bigger idea, that of a sexual "counterpart," a being "taken from man" that is man's *sexual complement*. This is the essential element in a sexual union where two "become one flesh." By stripping this aspect of "becoming one flesh" through use of the generic descriptor, "intimate life-partner," Powell is able to raise the possibility of a homosexual partnership "approximating the sort of intimate (normally heterosexual) bond that God willed to be a part of human experience" (p. 37). If, instead, Powell had replaced every occurrence of "intimate life-partner" and the like with "lifelong sexual complement of one's own," all talk of a homosexual approximation of the heterosexual bond would have been precluded from the start. The extent to which Powell does not view the reconstitution of male and female into a sexual whole as the central, indispensable feature of "becoming one flesh" is the extent to which Powell deviates from Genesis 2:18-24. There can be no exceptions to the male-female dimension of sexual relations because it is one of the two most vital considerations (N18).

3. *A conditional opportunity for sexual intimacy, not an opportunity by right.* Powell uses Genesis 2:18, “it is not good for the human to be alone,” as a crowbar to pry exceptions, at least potentially, from Scripture’s absolute prohibition of same-sex intercourse. His main premise, based on his interpretation of Genesis 2:18, appears in the first quotation cited in point 2 above. The church “requires” homosexuals, “for whom neither therapy nor celibacy appears viable,” to be celibate (pp. 31-32, 34, 38). Celibacy, in turn, “if required, will render many people’s lives ‘not good’ in the eyes of God” (ibid.). This, Powell thinks, compels the church to reconsider the possibility of exceptions and, so far as Powell’s personal view is concerned, to mandate exceptions. I have six problems with this reading of Genesis 2:18.

First, as noted in points 1 and 2, if Genesis 2:18-24 can be said to give all persons an *opportunity* for a sexual relationship, that opportunity must be defined as an opportunity to have a lifelong sexual complement of one’s own. Genesis 2:18-24 does not give anyone an opportunity — in Powell’s use the term seems to border on the meaning of an inalienable God-given *right* — to have a generic “life-partner” minus an other-sex prerequisite. In other words, this is at best a *conditional opportunity* for a sexual relationship. A “homosexual orientation,” which is already a sign of disordered sexuality, does not alter the prerequisite for a sexual complement. Indeed, without a sexual complement, it is not even possible, let alone allowable, for two persons of the same sex to become “one flesh” through a sexually intimate relationship. Sexual wholeness depends entirely on having two sexes. A sexual merger is precluded *on a structural level*, as are man-mother and human-animal sexual unions. Despite broader cultural trends to the contrary, the narrators of Genesis 1-2 and later interpreters such as Jesus and Paul disallowed all sexually intimate unions that did not have the sexual reunion of male and female as a prime objective. In short, if there is an opportunity for all, it is an opportunity that must first meet certain structural prerequisites. Sex or gender is one; number of partners, the term of commitment, and age are others — irrespective of whether the participants are “oriented” toward opposite-sex partners, monogamy, longevity, and sex with an adult. A complete loss of sexual interest can develop from many factors, not just the sex or gender of one’s partner. If people are unhappy with God’s conditional provision, they do not get to choose whatever option brings satisfaction to their sexual desires.

Second, there are different senses and degrees to a phrase like “not good.” While it is “not good” for humans to be alone, it is far *worse* for humans to engage in same-sex intercourse. The former is not a sin

but an experience of deprivation. The latter is regarded by Scripture as a violation of a core value in sexual ethics. To engage in same-sex intercourse as a means of averting loneliness is to subvert a higher value in Scripture for the sake of a lesser consideration. By the same token, to engage in one of the severest forms of sexual immorality (same-sex intercourse) as a means of avoiding additional sexual immoralities is, to put it bluntly, perverse. In my estimate, Powell seriously underestimates the degree to which Scripture regards the heterosexual dimension as a priority or, conversely, considers homoerotic intercourse per se as a high offense.

Third, Powell seems to assume that the *only* provision made by God to keep humans from being alone is the possibility of a committed sexual relationship with another person. But in the context of Genesis 2:18-25 there are no other humans. So obviously the first, and for a time only, provision to combat loneliness is the creation of a sexual counterpart for a sexually intimate union. Thereafter, however, the aloneness experienced by humans is partly alleviated through populating the world with offspring. There is also a strong stress in the New Testament on the church as the new family of believers. In short, the phrase “not good” and its linkage to the solution in 2:24 is, to a significant degree, conditioned by the special circumstance that there is no other human with whom the earthling is to have fellowship. In the scope of Scripture’s entirety, “becoming one flesh” with a sexual counterpart is far from God’s only answer to the problem of being alone, even if it is a significant answer.

Fourth, there are no guarantees in life that one will find a sexually satisfying marriage partner, let alone that one will live in marital bliss and harmony. Some do, but many who would like to — including a larger number of heterosexuals than homosexuals — do not. Every sexual rule risks denying a sexually “intimate lifetime partnership” to some group of people. The rule against same-sex intercourse is no exception. The alternative to such rules is sexual libertinism.

Fifth, Powell argues:

But there are significant differences between (a) an individual who chooses to live as a single person, (b) an individual who would prefer not to live as a single person but who is unable to find a partner, and (c) an individual who is *required* to live alone when otherwise he or she would find the partner he or she desires. (p. 31)

I have four problems with this argument. (1) No person is *required* to live alone. All people are required to conform their sexual desires

and relationships to the standards operative for the new covenant set down in Scripture. (2) As we noted earlier, no given homosexual Christian can predict that he or she will never experience any heterosexual arousal. Indeed, in the vast majority of cases some experience of heterosexual arousal for those who self-identify as homosexual is the norm. (3) There is no significant *existential* difference between (a) a heterosexual Christian who, in seeking to be faithful to the Lord, has not found a much desired "intimate life partner" (spouse) and (b) a homosexual Christian who, in exercising similar fidelity, is bereft of the same. (4) As suggested above, close intimate friendships — the *koinonia* or "partnership" with fellow believers — must always be kept in view as a counterweight to individual loneliness. It is not necessary to have sex with persons to be bonded to them. A classic case in point is Jonathan and David.

Sixth, I cannot agree with Powell's statement that "the Church must think carefully about whether it really wants to require [gay and lesbian] people to live in a manner that its Scriptures and its confessions maintain is *displeasing to God*" (p. 31; my emphasis). This way of formulating the matter is too one-sided and bleak. Singleness, even when experienced as a difficult deprivation, is not a sin; engaging in same-sex intercourse is. God is always *pleased* with someone who is obedient in hard times and *displeased* with those who live in disobedience. Life cannot be lived this side of the *eschaton* without some sense of deprivation and deep loss. Indeed, Christ himself called on those who would follow him to deny themselves, take up their cross, and lose their life for his sake (Mark 8:34-37). How can Christians who are denying themselves out of obedience to Jesus be living lives "displeasing to God"? Refraining from homosexual behavior, not participating in it, is pleasing to God.

Paul pleaded with God to remove his "thorn in the flesh" (cataracts?), only to discover that God's grace was sufficient for him, that God's power is perfected in his weakness (2 Corinthians 12:8-9). This was only one of numerous hardships faced by Paul in the course of his apostolic ministry (11:23-29). Yet he had learned to boast of his weaknesses "that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (12:9) and to be content in all circumstances, knowing that he could do all things through the One who strengthened him (12:10; cf. Philippians 4:11-12). God is ultimately pleased with forming Christ in us, often by making use of adverse circumstances. It is all too easy for us to lose sight of the "eternal weight of glory beyond all measure" that awaits us (2 Corinthians 4:17). Yes, the church should do what it can to help those experiencing deprivation — but always short of violating God's commands. The

church should continue working toward meeting the intimacy needs of heterosexuals and homosexuals alike without abandoning the core sexual standards of Scripture.

## V. The rest of the case for regarding same-sex intercourse as intrinsically sinful

The male-female prerequisite established in the Genesis creation stories cinches the point that the Bible presents same-sex intercourse not only as intrinsically unnatural but also as intrinsically sinful. However, so that there is no chance of resurrecting the allegedly biblical allowance of exceptions, we continue with the rest of the case.

### A. The Levitical prohibitions

As Powell himself argues, the Levitical prohibitions are opposed to male-male intercourse because male-male intercourse “involves a man doing something with another man that ought properly be done with a woman. This thought seems consistent with the perspective of the creation story” (p. 24). What is that something? “Lying with,” i.e., a euphemism for “having sexual intercourse with.” Now, what exceptional case of sex between males could one cite that would fly under the radar of these proscriptions? The only “exception” would be a case of sex between males that did not involve sex between males — a complete oxymoron. Powell is right to acknowledge:

That which is contrary to the normal state of affairs is not *necessarily* sinful, but the Holiness Code in the book of Leviticus indicates that homosexual activity is unnatural in a way that *is* sinful. Not everything in the Holiness Code applies to Christian morality, but Paul’s apparent citation of the prohibitions against same-sex activity (through use of the word *arsenokoitai*) carries those commandments over into the New Testament in a way that *does* make them relevant. (p. 29; N19)

Let us lay out the logical consequences of this observation:

- A. The Levitical prohibitions are absolute (without exception) as regards male-male intercourse. All such intercourse is necessarily (or intrinsically) sinful.
- B. Paul’s apparent citation of the prohibitions carries them over into the New Testament.

- C. Conclusion: The New Testament regards same-sex intercourse as intrinsically sinful and thus as something to be prohibited absolutely – no exceptions (N20).

The conclusion is unassailable. Powell says that the prohibitions are made “relevant” by Paul’s “apparent citation” but fails to draw the inevitable conclusion. His attempts at vitiating the force of this verdict in his discussion of *arsenokoitai* earlier in the article – “Still, the Church must be careful not to base moral teaching on an unsure interpretation of Scripture” (pp. 25-26) – are entirely unconvincing (see point 4 below) and, in the end, make the Levitical prohibitions *irrelevant* (N21). The Levitical prohibitions are only acknowledged as “relevant” if their view of male-male intercourse as intrinsically sinful is carried over into the interpretation of Paul’s indictment of same-sex intercourse. Given that all Jews in antiquity, including Jesus and Paul, were to a considerable extent reliant on the Levitical proscriptions for their opposition to same-sex intercourse, it is inconceivable that Jesus and Paul would have made Powell’s distinction between intrinsically unnatural and intrinsically sinful when the Levitical proscriptions made no such distinction. This one point, all by itself, is enough to sink Powell’s contention that the Bible teaches that same-sex intercourse is just “normally contrary to God’s will” (p. 36). But we proceed anyway.

#### B. The intertextual echo to Genesis 1:26-27 in Romans 1:23-27

In both Romans 1:24-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9 there are intertextual echoes back to Genesis 1-2. With respect to Romans 1:24-27, the allusions are specifically to Genesis 1. The immediate context in Romans 1:20 and 1:25 explicitly mentions “the creation of the world” and “the Creator,” respectively. Romans 1:23 transparently echoes Genesis 1:26:

Let us make a *human* according to our *image* and . . . *likeness*; and let them rule over the . . . *birds* . . . and the *cattle* . . . and the *reptiles*. (Genesis 1:26)

And they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the *likeness* of the *image* of a mortal *human* and of *birds* and of *four-footed animals* and of *reptiles*. (Romans 1:23)

In such a context Paul’s reference in Romans 1:26-27 to “females” having sex with females and “males” having sex with males, “contrary to nature” – that is, contrary to the material creation set in motion by the Creator and pronounced by God to be good – surely echoes Genesis 1:27: “male and female he made them.” What is the point of these echoes to Genesis 1:26-27? Idolatry and same-sex intercourse – high-

lighted among an array of sins cited in Romans 1:18-32 — together constitute a frontal assault on the work of the Creator. Instead of humans recognizing their intermediate place between God, whom alone humans were to worship, and animals, over which humans were to rule, humans “worshipped and served the creation rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:25). Fittingly, God “handed over” those who did not honor him to self-dishonoring desires for sex with members of the same sex. Those who had suppressed “the truth about God” visible in creation/nature (Romans 1:18-23, 25) would go on to suppress the truth about themselves visible in creation/nature, “committing indecency and receiving back among themselves the payback that was necessitated by their straying” from God (1:24, 26-27). For, though God “made them male and female” (Gen 1:27) for the purposes of sexual union and procreation (Gen 1:28), humans foolishly ignored the transparent complementarity of their sexuality by engaging in sex with the same sex and discrediting themselves. What is wrong, then, with same-sex intercourse, what makes it sinful, is that it does not correspond to the model of a male-female union given in these creation accounts (see N22 for a critique of Prof. David Fredrickson’s denial of a link to Genesis).

Moreover, not only do the allusions to Genesis 1:26-27 make clear what Paul finds objectionable and sinful about same-sex intercourse but so do the explicit contrasts posed in the wording of Romans 1:26-27: females having sex with females rather than with males and males having sex with other males rather than with females. This makes it impossible to argue that there might be some form of homosexual behavior that would not be sinful in Paul’s eyes. The only “exceptions” that Paul could possibly have allowed would be instances of male-male or female-female sexual intercourse between a man and a woman — again, a complete oxymoron.

### C. The reference to nature in Romans 1:26-27

Powell rightly states that in Paul’s understanding “*all* instances of homosexuality are unnatural.” But he adds that for Paul only

the instances of homosexuality known to his Roman readers are *both* unnatural *and* wrong. This still leaves open the possibility of some instances . . . in which homosexual relations could be regarded *only* as unnatural but *not* as wrong. (p. 28)

This argument is invalid. In Romans 1:24-27 Paul views same-sex intercourse as wrong precisely *because* it is contrary to nature. What is



given as a supreme instance of “uncleanness” — a term for immoral sexual activity (N23), equated with sin in Romans 6:19 — and of “dishonorable” or “degrading passions” and of “indecent” is that “females exchanged the *natural* use for that which is *contrary to nature*, and likewise also the males, having left behind the *natural* use of the female, were inflamed with their yearning for one another, males with males.” In other words, to exchange what is natural, defined as male-female intercourse, for that which is unnatural — female-female or male-male intercourse — is, in Paul’s view, to engage in sinful, unclean, degrading, and indecent behavior. This sinful suppression of the truth about sexual design in nature parallels on the horizontal dimension the suppression of the truth about God in creation/nature that idolatry is on the vertical dimension.

So in this context it is impossible to say that only those instances “known to [Paul’s] Roman readers are *both* unnatural *and* wrong” if “all instances of homosexual relations are unnatural” for Paul. Rather, one must say that if Paul regarded all instances of homosexual behavior as unnatural, then he regarded them all as wrong, for he deduces their wrongness, their sinfulness, from their character as actions contrary to nature. I do not know whether it is a slip on Powell’s part or not, but he himself writes at one point: “Paul does not object to what he calls ‘shameless acts’ involving same-sex partners because they are promiscuous or exploitative; he specifically objects to them because they are ‘unnatural’” (p. 27). If *unnatural* in this context does not necessarily mean *sinful*, then how could Paul base his objection to same-sex intercourse on its unnaturalness?

Furthermore, it will not do to argue, as Powell does, that actions can sometimes be contrary to (or beyond) nature without being sinful (p. 22). For the way in which the expression “contrary to nature” (*para phusin*) is employed in the context of Romans 1:24-27 precludes a benign interpretation for this particular case (N24). Indeed whenever *para phusin* and like expressions appear in early Jewish literature with reference to same-sex intercourse they always constitute a basis for categorizing same-sex intercourse as a terrible sin (N25). In early Judeo-Christian understanding, some kinds of acts that are contrary to nature are *always* sinful (e.g., bestiality, sex with one’s parent or child). That is exactly the case here. Same-sex intercourse was not regarded as a benign instance of acting beyond nature, like adoption. It was treated as a sinful rejection of the way in which God made male and female, as creations designed for a complementary, opposite-sex sexual relationship.

#### D. The evidence from 1 Corinthians 6:9

Powell allows that, as regards the vice list in 1 Corinthians 6:9,

Paul might be viewed as carrying the prohibitions from Leviticus over into the New Testament, indicating that they *do* apply to Christians: sexual intercourse between two men is regarded as sinful and both the active (*arsenokoitai*) and passive (*malakoi*) participants in such activity need to repent. (p. 25)

Yet he then gives the following caution:

Still, the Church must be careful not to base moral teaching on an unsure interpretation of Scripture. . . . First, it is possible that the words are colloquial expressions referring to a particular type of homosexual conduct practiced in the first-century Corinthian culture. . . . Second, even if this is not true . . . these words are certainly not technical or scientific terms that necessarily describe *any* instance in which a man engages in sex with another man. . . . In short, the condemnations of *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* in these texts may imply that *generally speaking*, men who have sex with other men are acting in a way that is not pleasing to God, but such condemnations do not disallow instances in which men who have sex with each other are *not* behaving as *arsenokoitai* or *malakoi*. (pp. 25-26)

I do not see how this can be possible.

1. *The Levitical connection.* The term *arsenokoitai* means “men who lie with males” (N26). How can that not be inclusive, especially since it is patterned on the Levitical prohibitions which Powell himself admits are opposed to male-male intercourse on the grounds of what it is not: male-female intercourse? If a man is supposed to have sex only with a woman, what kind of male-male sexual union would not be covered?

2. *The Romans 1:24-27 connection.* Surely the best commentary on what *arsenokoitai* would have meant for Paul, apart from Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, appears in Romans 1:24-27 where Paul describes in the harshest terms possible the wrong done whenever a male makes use of another male, rather than a female, as a partner in sexual intercourse. Given this, plus the echo to Genesis 1:26-27 and the appeal to male-female complementarity in nature, it is obvious that Paul — like the Levitical prohibitions — is condemning every form of male-male intercourse in Romans 1:27 and so in 1 Corinthians 6:9 as well. Like many pro-homosex interpreters, Powell makes the mistake of discussing 1 Corinthians 6:9 in isolation from Romans 1:24-27.

3. *The incest connection in 1 Corinthians 5.* The vice list in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 appears within a larger discussion of a case of incest (1 Corinthians 5). It is clear what Paul finds wrong with incest: the same thing that Leviticus finds wrong with incest. It is sex with one's own flesh (18:6); that is, sex with someone who is too much of a familial like. This is precisely what is *structurally* wrong with "men who lie with males": they are having sex with another who is too much of a like or same, here a person of the same sex, a gender same. If same-sex intercourse is wrong because it is sex between two non-complementary sexual sames, what kind of male-male sexual union could possibly be left out?

4. *The marriage connection in 1 Corinthians 7.* The chapter following the vice list is about marriage. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul discusses only male-female sexual unions because these alone are valid. The presumption here, as everywhere in Scripture, is that sex is to be confined to male-female marriage. And if sex is to be confined to male-female marriage, what form of male-male sex could constitute a valid exception?

5. *The Genesis 2:24 connection in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20.* In the probably hypothetical example of a Christian resorting prostitutes in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, Paul cites Genesis 2:24 (6:16). Clearly, in talking about sexual immorality, the standard set by the creation stories is Paul's own standard. The clause "the two shall become one flesh" obviously has in view the man who becomes joined to his woman/wife. What male-male attempt at creating a "one-flesh" union could possibly qualify when the re-merger requires a male and a female? To juxtapose *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* with Genesis 2:24 is to remove any possibility that there might be "instances in which men who have sex with each other are not behaving as *arsenokoitai*."

Given the above considerations, Powell is unconvincing when he claims that *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* are imprecise, non-technical terms not necessarily embracing all forms of male-male intercourse. To be sure, Powell is right that several of the terms in the vice lists in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10 may allow for some wiggle room in exceptional circumstances. Yet Powell cannot make this a universal rule. What persons who venerate the statues of foreign gods would Paul not have regarded as idolaters? What persons who have consensual sex with people other than their living spouse would not fall under the rubric of adulterers for Paul?

Powell latches onto the word *pornoi*, which he translates as "fornicators," and argues that there may be "exceptional circumstances in which sexual relations between persons who are not legally married

might *not* be considered fornication" (p. 26). Later he cites the following example: "In remote locations where neither clergy nor legal magistrates are readily available, the Church has sometimes allowed committed couples to form sexual unions and bear children without taking part in a civil marriage service" (p. 35). Yet his example is a mere technicality. The church may allow such unions precisely because they do, in effect, constitute marriages. The Bible does not prescribe that clergy or legal magistrates officiate at a marriage ceremony. So their absence does not pose an insurmountable problem.

Moreover, *pornoi* here is a broader term than fornication. It means: "the sexually immoral." In 1 Corinthians 5 it includes participants in incest (vv. 9-11). The related abstract noun *porneia* is used of the act of soliciting prostitutes in 1 Corinthians 6:13, 18; indeed, the feminine personal noun, *porne*, properly refers to a "prostitute, harlot." With regard to the issue of prostitution discussed in 6:12-20, one might ask: are there exceptional circumstances of commercial sexual activity that the church would not consider prostitution and might therefore bless? I know of none. As for the case of incest in 1 Corinthians 5, although there is no single Greek (or Hebrew) word to describe a person having sex with his (step-) mother (N27), there are specific biblical prohibitions of it (Leviticus 18:7-8; 20:11; Deuteronomy 27:20), just as the reference to *arsenokoitai* relies on the prohibitions in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. In what exceptional circumstances might the church want to bless such unions? I suppose some sort of technicality would have to be raised by which one might argue that the woman in question is not one's mother or stepmother. What this technicality would be, I know not. Certainly Paul himself in 1 Corinthians 5 gives no indication that exceptions to the general rule might exist.

Since *arsenokoitai* is likely to have been patterned on the Levitical prohibitions of male-male intercourse, one would have to argue some technicality that would get around the all-inclusive character of those prohibitions. One would have to contend that the man seeking to have active intercourse with another male, or the male with whom he has intercourse, is not really a male (N28). What would justify such a contention? Certainly not the exceptions suggested by Powell; namely, exceptions for men of exclusive homoerotic orientation who commit themselves to monogamous lifelong unions. For such men do not cease to be men; nor do they claim to be other than men (N29). Similarly, one might ask with respect to the English term *bestiality*: are there any instances where a human having willful sex with an animal would not be a case

of bestiality? Again, one would have to argue on the basis of a technicality: either the human is not a human or the animal is not an animal. Yet no such technicality could be persuasively presented.

Accordingly, we must contend against Powell that unless the church can establish on the grounds of some clear technicality that the participants in an alleged homoerotic encounter are not, in fact, members of the same sex, the church would have no legitimate basis for circumventing 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10.

#### **E. No great mystery: what Paul would have prescribed for the homosexual Christian in a committed homosexual union.**

In an important paragraph at the end of p. 31 Powell discusses what advice Paul might have given to a homosexual believer.

Powell begins by claiming, "It seems unlikely that Paul would have counseled a homosexual believer simply to remain celibate" (N30). Why would it seem unlikely? Even in 1 Corinthians 7 where he states that husbands and wives should normally not deprive one another of sexual intercourse "because of sexual immorality" (7:2-4), he commands that "if in fact [a wife] is separated [from her husband], she should remain unmarried or be reconciled with her husband" (7:11). Obviously if Paul was willing to counsel divorced wives to remain unmarried unless they remarried their former husbands, how much more would he have counseled believers with persistent and exclusive homoerotic desires to abstain from all sex with persons of the same sex? For the former did not entail a form of unnatural sexual intercourse; the latter did.

Powell continues: "More likely, Paul would have hoped that the sanctification of a believer . . . would replace [the 'degrading passions'] with natural yearnings that would allow for a normal, heterosexual marriage (Rom. 6:22; 1 Cor. 6:11)." Certainly Paul would have "hoped for" this. We all hope for this. However, hoping for something and expecting something as a matter of course are two very different things. Powell may be contradicting himself at this point. For earlier in the article he makes a point of arguing *against* those who cite 1 Corinthians 6:11 ("this is what some of you used to be") as a proof text for the view that all homosexuals can be transformed into heterosexuals. According to Powell, 1 Corinthians 6:11 "seems to refer to changes in behavior rather than to changes with regard to what some modern therapists call a person's 'sexual orientation'" (p. 26). If Powell is right that 1 Corinthians 6:11 indicates that Paul expected a change in behavior rather than an eradication of primary homoerotic impulses—and I believe Powell is

right — how can Powell subsequently argue that “we cannot know for certain what Paul would have prescribed for the redeemed Christian who continues to have homosexual impulses” (p. 31)? Powell’s own reading of 1 Corinthians 6:11 indicates what Paul would have prescribed: Do not continue to engage in same-sex intercourse. You used to be a man who lies with males (or a woman who lies with a female). Stop being that kind of person. Change your behavior. You are no longer a slave to the sinful erotic desires for the same sex that may continue to exist in your bodily members.

Similarly, in Romans 6:19-21, Paul— while residing in Corinth — urged the believers at Rome not to be under the control of innate sinful passions:

Just as you (viz., when you were unbelievers) presented your members as slaves to *uncleanness* and to lawlessness for lawlessness, so now (viz., as believers) present your members as slaves to righteousness for holiness. . . . For when you were slaves of sin, you were free with respect to righteousness. What fruit were you then having? Things of which you are now *ashamed*. For the end result of those things is *death*.

This is an obvious reference back to 1:24-27, where same-sex intercourse is singled out among sexual sins as a prime example of “uncleanness” and of “dishonorable passions” and “indecent,” which along with other sins leads to death (1:32). *The very fact that Paul had to exhort believers not to return to such filthy conduct indicates the ongoing power of such impulses in their Christian lives.* By the same token, he believed that the Spirit made possible freedom from the dominant sway of all sinful impulses. The stakes were very high indeed:

So then, brethren, we are debtors not to the flesh to live in conformity to the flesh (i.e., our sinful impulses), for if you live in conformity to the flesh, you are going to die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are being led by the Spirit, these are the sons of God. (Romans 8:12-14)

Paul certainly did not believe that becoming a Christian put an end to all strong temptations to have sex with someone of the opposite sex other than one’s spouse; yet he could absolutely proscribe all prostitution, adultery, and (implicitly) polygamy and severely restrict the options for divorce and remarriage. As Paul told the Galatian believers,

I say to you, walk by the Spirit and you will *not* carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh desires against the Spirit,

and the Spirit against the flesh, for these things are opposed to one another, that you may not do whatever you want. But if you are being led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are sexual immorality, *uncleanness*, licentiousness. . . . [T]hose who serially do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. . . . Those who belong to Christ Jesus crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also line up with (or: keep in step with) the Spirit. (Galatians 5:16-25)

Different sinful desires, sexual or otherwise, afflict different people at different rates of intensity. One person may have extraordinary difficulty in managing one kind of temptation, while another person may encounter difficulty in an entirely different area. Each person must subject his or her sinful desires to the Spirit's leading, die to self, and live for God. Those who struggle with intense homoerotic desires do not get an exemption. If it were otherwise, then there would be no point to any regulation of human behavior. In effect the message that would be sent is: "You do not have to obey this command if it turns out to be too hard for you." To proscribe homoerotic behavior absolutely only to those who do not experience intense homoerotic desires is no real proscription. Adultery and sex with prostitutes is proscribed equally to all alike, even though it is much harder for some people than for others to restrict sexual desire to one lifetime sex partner.

Powell claims that "we cannot know for certain what Paul would have prescribed for the redeemed Christian who continues to have homosexual impulses or to engage in homosexual activity that is neither promiscuous nor exploitative" (p. 31; N31). This claim stands in apparent contradiction to his admission that in Romans 1:26-27

Paul does not object to what he calls "shameless acts" involving same-sex partners because they are promiscuous or exploitative; he specifically objects to them because they are "unnatural." That verdict would seem to apply to all instances of sexual intercourse between same-sex partners, regardless of whether the sex was casual and regardless of whether prostitution or exploitation was involved. (p. 27)

Simply put, if promiscuity and exploitation are not the prime reasons for Paul's indictment of homosexual behavior, then there are no grounds for arguing that a non-promiscuous and non-exploitative homoerotic relationship would have changed Paul's indictment (N32). At the beginning of his article, Powell states:

Many Christians notice that no biblical text ever specifically comments on the morality of sexual relations between two men or two women who are in a loving relationship characterized by lifelong commitment. Thus, when two Christian men or women ask the Church to bless a relationship in which they will become romantic, spiritual, and probably sexual "life-partners," the Church is presented with a situation that never comes up, as such, in Scripture. (p. 19)

Such claims cannot be substantiated. Three points suffice to demonstrate this. First, the above observation is the equivalent of saying:

No biblical text ever specifically comments on the morality of sexual relations *between a mother and son or between two adult siblings* who are in a loving relationship characterized by lifelong commitment. Thus, when two Christian *nuclear-family members* ask the Church to bless a relationship in which they will become romantic, spiritual, and probably sexual "life-partners," the Church is presented with a situation that never comes up, as such, in Scripture.

Scripture does, in fact, address committed homoerotic unions, just as it addresses committed incestuous unions. It does so by taking up all possible forms under absolute proscriptions, making matters of commitment secondary to larger structural concerns such as prohibiting unions between people who are too much alike. Second, in the case of homoerotic unions, there is a distortion of gender itself since the logic of sexual intercourse necessarily converts one's same-sex partner into a sexual other. A homoerotic union characterized by fidelity and longevity does not alleviate this problem. Indeed, a lifelong relationship only exacerbates the problem by regularizing it, constantly conditioning the participants to image themselves in sexual union as complementary when in fact they are not. Third, the ancients were able to conceive of non-exploitative and non-promiscuous, lifelong loving relationships between two males; and such relationships also existed among lesbians (N33). Yet Jews and Christians in the ancient world, and even occasional Greco-Roman moralists, chose not to make exceptions because, loving or not, such relationships did violence to the stamp of gender impressed on the participants by nature (N34).

Powell goes on to characterize as pure "speculation" the view that Paul "would have favored excommunicating Christians who engage in homosexual activities *just as* he did believers who were involved in incestuous relationships (1 Cor. 5:1-5)" (p. 31, emphasis mine; N35). Yet



that Paul would have recommended the same kind of discipline for a serial unrepentant participant in male-male intercourse as for a serial unrepentant participant in incestuous intercourse is evident from the context. The vice list in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 is the same as the vice lists in 5:10-11, with three additional vices that merely expand on the meaning of sexually immoral people (not only participants in incest and prostitution but also adulterers and passive and active partners in male-male intercourse) and one additional vice regarding economic exploitation (not only robbers but also thieves). Repetitive, self-affirming participants in the vices of 6:9-10 risk exclusion from the kingdom of God, Paul says: "Or do you not know that unrighteous people will not inherit the kingdom of God? Stop deceiving yourselves. Neither the sexually immoral, . . . nor adulterers, nor the effeminate males who play the sexual role of females (the 'soft'), nor men who lie with males . . . shall inherit the kingdom of God." It is this view that motivated Paul to recommend a suspension or temporary ban from participation in the life of the church to persons engaged in serial unrepentant incest and in the other vices mentioned in 5:10-11 and, by inference, 6:9-10: "do not associate with anyone who calls himself a 'brother' if he is a sexually immoral person. . . . Is it not those inside [the church] that you are to judge?" (5:11-12).

The seriousness of averting exclusion from the kingdom of God demanded, once other options had been exhausted, vigorous ecclesiastical efforts at reform — up to and including removal of grave offenders from the life of the community until repentance was manifested. It obviously mattered not to Paul whether a person was a constitutional adulterer or sex addict. He believed that all Christians had the power, through the Spirit, not to be subject to the control and dominion of the sinful sexual passions of the flesh. This meant not that they would be immune from any further sinning, much less free from all temptation, but that they would at least be penitent upon the commission of sin and, in the main, regulated by the Spirit in their behavior.

Powell ends his argument on p. 31 by asserting:

In any case, no projection of what Paul "might have thought" [N36] about this situation can be determinative for the Church's deliberations. Canonical authority extends only to what is actually written in documents that the Church confesses to be Scripture, not to what thoughts the authors of those documents might have entertained but did not record.

Well, yes and no. It depends what one means by "actually written." We have no meaningful doubt about what Paul would have

thought as regards lots of situations that did not come up in the churches to which Paul writes. We let these unwritten, but utterly obvious, logical corollaries and conclusions function as though they were written. Thereby, they become “determinative for the Church’s deliberations” and conveyors of “canonical authority.” Perhaps I am wrong in saying this, but I should go so far as to suggest that, in practice, Powell himself tacitly operates with a similar understanding when he makes available his summary of what the Bible teaches for the ELCA’s deliberations (N37).

All the same, let us turn to two examples not drawn from Powell’s paper to make the point. Neither Jesus nor Paul (nor, for that matter, any NT author) said anything about bestiality. Only a handful of Old Testament texts proscribe it (Exodus 22:19; Leviticus 18:23; 20:15-16; Deuteronomy 27:21). What would Jesus and Paul have thought/done had they encountered a disciple/believer who was having regular sex with sheep? Or, turning to a specific case of incest different from the one dealt with in 1 Corinthians 5 (N38), what would Jesus or Paul have thought about a Christian man having sex with his sister? We would not say: We do not know for certain and, in any case, no projection of what they might have thought is determinative for church deliberations or carries any canonical authority. Rather, we would say that, despite the fact that those particular cases do not come up for discussion in the New Testament, it is obvious from matters of historical and literary context what Jesus and all New Testament authors would have thought, at least in general terms. They would have uttered a strong “No” to such behavior, regardless of whatever strong desires and loving intent were motivating the action in question. Would such an unwritten, but obvious, “projection” be determinative for church deliberations? Yes, in the sense that, in wrestling with whether these Levitical prohibitions carry over into the new covenant, we would conclude that the “silence” of the New Testament intimates canonical certitude across the Testaments, not canonical ambivalence (N39).

There is no great mystery about what Paul “might have thought” and “would have done” if the Corinthian believers had written back that some believing members of their community continued “to have homosexual impulses or to engage in homosexual activity that is neither promiscuous nor exploitative” (p. 31). He would have said: do not succumb to such desires; but if ever or whenever you do succumb, repent: turn back to God, experience forgiveness, and commit yourself anew to walking by the Spirit. As we have shown, Paul believed that it was an expected part of that Christian life that various sinful passions

of the flesh would continue to challenge the new-creation work of the Spirit. Such passions were to be resisted if one hoped to inherit the kingdom of God. The fact of ongoing homoerotic impulses, even of an exclusive sort, would not have altered what Paul, other authors of New Testament scripture, and Jesus would have found wrong about same-sex intercourse: its same-sexness. So why should it have changed their evaluation? They understood such sexual intercourse to be a violation of the embodied complementarity of male-female unions ordained by God at creation, as told in Genesis 1-2, and embedded in nature, as evident in basic male-female differences. By attempting to join two discordant sexual halves, same-sex intercourse defiles the distinctive sexual integrity of the participants. Scripture treats this not as a relatively benign act but as a serious transgression of God's creation of gendered beings, as bad as, or worse than, incest. The difficulty of the struggle against homoerotic urges, while affecting the degree of pastoral intervention, is quite beside the point so far as assessing the behavior as a severe sin is concerned. The fact that some Christians have an exclusive pedophilic orientation in no way affects a negative evaluation of pedophilia, even when the children involved turn out asymptomatic for negative side-effects. Christians have been redeemed or bought with a price, Christ's death, not to do what they want but precisely for the purpose of glorifying God with their bodily members and eschewing all sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:15-20).

In short, it is indeed "determinative for the Church's deliberations" to discern what Jesus, Paul, and New Testament authors generally "might (would) have thought" about believers satisfying persistent homoerotic impulses. What they would have prescribed for the homosexual Christian involved in a committed homosexual union is apparent.

The five points made in this section, plus the preceding discussion of Genesis 1-2, demonstrate that from the perspective of Scripture same-sex intercourse is not only an intrinsically unnatural act but also an intrinsically sinful act (N40).

## **VI. Why the sexual orientation argument doesn't work**

The Bible's alleged unawareness of something akin to a homosexual orientation is a critical assumption in Powell's discussion of exceptions. It simply had not occurred to Paul and other biblical authors — so the argument goes — that some persons, including believers, might have a persistent and dominant sexual attraction for persons of the same sex. The church has to forge a new path, based on new knowledge about

sexual orientations. It is fair to say that the “orientation argument” is the dominant reason given today by prohomosex apologists for disregarding the views of Scripture on same-sex intercourse (N41). As I see it, there are three main considerations that subvert this “conventional wisdom” in prohomosex circles:

- A. There were many theories in the Greco-Roman world positing biological influence on the development of one or more forms of homoerotic behavior.
- B. Nothing in the language of Romans 1:24-27 suggests or depends on the view that “homosexuality” is a chosen condition of constitutional heterosexuals. In fact, the language fits quite well with a view of homoerotic passions as preexisting, controlling, and exclusive.
- C. That a “homosexual orientation” would not have altered Paul’s indictment of homosexual behavior is evident also from the ancient recognition of a distinction between innate predispositions and something that is “natural,” as well as Paul’s own view of what sin is.

It now remains to provide the documentation for these points.

#### **A. Ancient theories of a biological basis for some homoerotic attraction**

In the Greco-Roman world a number of theories existed – Platonic, Aristotelian, Hippocratic, and astrological – suggesting that at least some forms of homoerotic desire arose in part or whole from biological conditions (N42).

1. The myth of human origins expounded by Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium* (189c-193d) traces same-sex passions to the primordial past before male-male, female-female, and male-female humans were split apart by Zeus. After the splitting, people forever longed for their other half, whether a same-sex or opposite-sex partner. “And these are they who continue with one another throughout life.... [each] desiring to join together and to be fused into a single entity with his beloved and to become one person from two” (N43).

2. Aristotelian thought speculated that some males who desired to be penetrated were so disposed “by nature”; that is, because of sperm ducts leading to the anus, thereby building pressure that requires release through the friction of penetration. Others were so disposed “from habit”; that is, owing to pleasurable childhood memories of receptive sex with an adult male and to the reinforcement of repetition. This habit “becomes like (i.e., takes on the characteristics of) nature.” Habit itself was more likely to take hold “in the case of one who is both lustful and

soft (*malakos*)” — in modern-day parlance, where a person has a biological predisposition toward gender nonconformity. In instances where sperm ducts led to both the anus and the penis males would desire both to penetrate and to be penetrated. “So for all those for whom nature is the cause, no one would describe these persons as lacking in self-control, any more than they would women because they do not take the active sexual role but the passive.” Yet even “the effeminate by nature (*hoi phusei thçludriai*) . . . are constituted contrary to nature (*para phusin*),” a mistake or “defect” in nature (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1148b; Pseudo-Aristotle, *Problems* 4:26 [879b-880a]; N44).

3. The Hippocratic treatise *On Regimen* (1.28-29; fourth century B.C.) attributed the degree of manliness or femininity in both men and women to the mixture of male and female sperm at conception, with the sperm of each containing both male and female elements. The extent to which male-based sperm or female-based sperm dominated influenced the extent to which a child would become very manly or very feminine, less manly or less feminine, a male “man-woman” (an *androgynos* in passion, not necessarily in intersexed body) or “a manly woman” (*andreia*). The degree of manliness or femininity would, in turn, influence choice for an active or passive role in sexual intercourse. Biology was not everything, though; diet, education, and habits also played a part (N45). Parmenides, a pre-Socratic philosopher, held a similar conception (as recounted by Soranus in Caelius Aurelianus, *Chronic Diseases* 4.9.134-35).

4. Not referring to congenital causation but nevertheless relevant to our discussion here is an old Cretan legend retold by the Roman poet Ovid (43 B.C.-A.D. 18). According to the tale, a mother, cognizant of her husband’s intense desire for a son, hid from her husband the fact that their new child was a girl. Raised as a boy (we would say: *socialized*), Iphis developed an erotic attraction for females. When she fell in love with Ianthe, another female, she bemoaned her “monstrous” passion because she recognized it to be contrary not only to custom but also to nature and divine law. And yet she was powerless to override this desire. Her tragic circumstances were resolved only when the goddess Isis intervened to change Iphis into a male, thereby enabling her to marry Ianthe (N46). The story nicely illustrates two points: (a) socialization can create a powerful, even irresistible, drive for a homoerotic relationship (in modern terms, nurture becoming nature); and (b) even irresistible drives can be described as contrary to nature and monstrous.

5. Soranus, an early second-century A.D. physician in Rome, wrote about chronic diseases, including why some men avidly desired pen-

etration in adulthood. The Greek text of his work no longer survives but a Latin “translation” by the fifth-century writer Caelius Aurelianus does. The part that interests us here is *On Chronic Diseases* 4.9.131-137 (N47). According to Soranus, “Many leaders of the medical schools of thought say that the disease is inherited and therefore comes down to posterity with the seed — not indeed thereby condemning nature...but condemning the human race because it held on so strongly to such vices once introduced that they could not be purged by any healing.” In other words, what human society pursued eventually became an inherited disease (N48). Yet even then human responsibility was not eviscerated because, like other inherited diseases such as “gout, epilepsy, madness,” this disease’s negative effects could be “weakened” and made “milder” if humans strove to resist it (4.9.135-36; N49).

Soranus himself did not think that a “disease of the body” led to the development of *molles* (Gk. *malthakoi*), “soft men” eager for penetration (*subacti*) — a condition that he described as one “not from nature,” insofar as it “subjugated to obscene uses parts not so intended” and disregarded “the places of our body which divine providence destined for definite functions” (4.9.131; N50). Because Soranus did not believe that “bodily treatment” could “be successfully applied to drive out the disease,” he classified the condition as a “disease of the mind” (*mens* or *animus*); in other words, a psychological disorder (131-33). Accordingly, a cure could be affected only through mental processes: “One must, rather, control the mind, which is afflicted by such a deep disgrace” (133). Soranus similarly diagnosed as “afflicted by a diseased mind” “women who are called *tribades* [‘those who rub’]” who “practice both kinds of love” and “rush to have sex with women more than with men and pursue women with an almost masculine jealousy” (132-33; N51). For all his talk of mental illness, however, Soranus did not think the condition besetting *molles* and *tribades* was easily amenable to change. Rather, it was a chronic mental “disease” influenced indirectly by biological factors and powerful enough to “afflict” for life the bodies whose energies it sapped. He compared aggressive female bisexuality, with its dominant bent for lesbian relationships, to alcohol addiction (133). He also connected an exclusive desire on the part of males to be penetrated with a lack of virile powers in the body, particularly in old age (132, 137; N52). Elsewhere Soranus attributed some “masculine” sexual behavior on the part of women to an overly large clitoris, for which he recommends surgical removal (N53).

6. Various Greco-Roman astrologers linked up homoerotic desire with the constellation of the stars at the time of one’s birth (N54). For example:

(a) According to Dositheos of Sidon (fl. A.D. 25-75), a particular lining up of Venus and the Moon can cause the birth of females "desirous of women" and males "desirous of males" of any age. Other configurations of planets can cause males to be feminized and want to have done to them "what one does in women"; or can cause females to be masculinized, doing "in women the act of men," an "unnatural" and "licentious" act (*Carmen Astrologicum* 2.7.6-17; cf. 2.4.21; 2.6.15; 2.26.15).

(b) Ptolemy (second century A.D.) made similar statements, adding that when Venus and Mars together appeared in masculine signs of the zodiac the conjunction could cause females not only to assume an active (masculine) sexual role with women but also to do so openly, referring to their mates as "lawful wives." Ptolemy characterized both females who played the sexual role of males and males who played the sexual role of females as having a lifelong, and apparently incurable, disease of the nonrational part of the soul (*Tetrabiblos* 3.14 §171-72; N55).

(c) Firmacus Maternus (early fourth century A.D.) also shared the same views as Dositheos, stating that particular planetary conjunctions produce males who will "always be lovers of boys" and "never wish for intercourse with women," while others produce those "captured by an inverted passionate desire of lust contrary to nature" (referring solely to receptive male partners?). Still others produce "mannish women" who "never couple sexually with men" and "desire intercourse with women like men," "impurely and unchastely" (N56).

Ancient astrological theories obviously have significant differences from some modern theories of innate causation. The main point, though, is that the former regard types of homoerotic attraction as congenital, lifelong, and sometimes exclusive (N57). Moreover, noteworthy is the fact that, even though these conditions are brought about by planetary configurations, the astrologers still treat at least some of these conditions as "contrary to nature" – that is, as congenital byproducts of inauspicious planetary alignments.

Thus, in the Greco-Roman milieu there was a range of theories about the development of at least some forms of homoerotic behavior that ran the gamut from, in today's terms, essentialism to social constructionism:

- A creation splitting of male-male or female-female binary humans.
- Sperm ducts leading to the anus.
- A particular mix of male and female "sperm" elements at conception.
- An inherited disease analogous to a mutated gene.
- A chronic disease of the mind or soul influenced indirectly by bio]

A disease of the soul produced by socialization factors and difficult to resist.

- The particular alignment of heavenly constellations at birth.

Particularly interesting is the close interrelationship between biology and socialization, nature and nurture, presented in a number of theories — not unlike modern scientific theory. To be sure, some of these theories are closer to contemporary speculations about homosexual causation than others. Another difference is that most of them focus more on passive receptive roles for males and active (sometimes penetrative) roles for women than on orientation *per se*. Nevertheless, the relevance of these theories cannot be discounted. First, these roles were commonly expressed in homoerotic activity, in some instances exclusively so. Second, a couple of the theories do suggest a primary homosexual orientation for some or all active males and passive females as well. Greek and Roman literature also makes references to exclusive same-sex attraction on the part of some males, even among the married. For example, the figure of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* underscores that marriage for those homoerotically-oriented was a façade: "And when they reach manhood, they become lovers of boys and are not inclined *by nature* toward marriage and the procreation of children, yet are compelled to do so by the law/custom (*nomos*)" (192A-B). Third, the distinction between roles and orientation would carry less significance in a Judeo-Christian framework that held *all* homoerotic activity to be contrary to nature, not just homoerotic behavior practiced by women and feminized passive males. Differences with contemporary theories are inconsequential to the overall point: Many in the ancient world believed some homoerotic practice could be traced to interplay between biology and nurture; moreover, that homoerotic impulses could be very resistant to change. In view of the above information, it is evident that we can no longer assume that Paul was incapable of conceiving of some biological causation for at least some forms of homoerotic proclivity and behavior (for a detailed comparison with Philo's views, see N58).

Indeed, it is inconceivable that Paul would have been totally unaware of boys in the Greco-Roman world who, from their earliest period of sexual awareness, were socialized as the receptive partners of insertive males and who, as adults, continued to desire — in many instances exclusively so — sex with other adult males. Philo was aware of them and he speaks of their being "accustomed" and "accustoming themselves" at an early age to desiring such practices as part of their transformation into females, which worked in their very souls a dis-



ease "hard to fight against" (*Abraham* 136; *Contemplative Life* 60; *Special Laws* 3.37). Paul's reference to the *malakoi* ("soft men") in 1 Corinthians 6:9 cinches the assumption that he knew of the existence of lifelong homoerotic proclivity.

### B. The wording of Romans 1:24-27

Given the number and range of theories for homoerotic attraction circulating in the Greco-Roman world, it is likely that Paul was aware of the possibility that some persons were disposed, through a combination of biological and social factors, to sex with persons of the same sex, sometimes exclusively so. Certainly there is nothing in the wording of Romans 1:24-27 that suggests that "homosexuality" is a *chosen* condition of constitutional heterosexuals. Obviously consensual behavior is always, by definition, chosen. But the relationship between choice and the biologically related impulses that stimulate behavior is more complex. Romans 1:24-27 reflects this fact.

1. *On the link to idolatry.* Romans 1:18-32 does not picture idolatry (in the literal sense of worshipping statues) as a necessary prerequisite for homoerotic passion any more than it does for any other form of "sexual uncleanness" (*akatharsia*, 1:24) or for covetousness and envy (1:29). The text refers to collective entities, not individuals, and to widespread effect, not origin (for the origin of sin, see 5:12-21). The possibility of non-idolatrous believers engaging in "sexual uncleanness," including same-sex intercourse, was a prospect that Paul vigorously warned against (Romans 6:19-22; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; N59).

2. *On "exchanging" and "leaving behind" natural intercourse with the opposite sex.* The references in Romans 1:26-27 to the fact that "females exchanged (*metellaxan*) the natural use for what was contrary to nature" and to "the males leaving behind (*aphentes*) the natural use of the female" do *not* describe a choice of homosexual *desire* over heterosexual desire (as is commonly assumed by pro-homosex scholars). Rather, they describe a choice of *behavior* stimulated by disoriented passions over behavior motivated by nature. *Nature* here refers to the clear revelation of male-female complementarity in material creation. Humans deliberately suppressed this clear revelation in order to satisfy cravings for same-sex intercourse (N60). Paul's point parallels his observation about the exchange of God for idols (1:18-23). The exchange is one of reality for unreality, a clear revelation known in the material world of creation and nature for the foolish imaginations of a darkened heart and unfit mind (N61). Nothing in the wording assumes an experience of heterosexual desire or behavior prior to engaging in homosexual sex. Also,

the words “exchanged” and “leaving behind” suggest exclusive homoerotic behavior rather than a bisexual life.

3. On “giving over” and “desire.” The very language of “God gave them over” (*paredoken autous ho theos*) in 1:24, 26, 28 presupposes preexisting sinful desires beyond human control. Otherwise, to what did God hand them over? The idea of dominant sinful sexual desires is precisely the picture presented later in Romans 6:15-23 when Paul speaks of the pre-Christian life of his audience of Roman believers. Formerly they lacked the very freedom to do right, enslaved as they were to “sexual uncleanness” and to other forms of “lawless behavior” (6:19) and without the counterbalancing power of the Spirit (7:6). Paul does not claim that these desires are eradicated in the Christian life (Galatians 5:17). They are instead brought under the management of the Spirit. *Desire* (*epithumia*, 1:24) is picked up again in Romans 7:7-23 as an innate impulse in the human body beyond ultimate human control.

4. On being “inflamed” with passion. The language of being “inflamed with their yearning for one another, males with males” (1:27) also suggests homoerotic desires that are both exclusive and controlling. It is sometimes claimed that Paul’s main concern in Romans 1:24-27 was with excess passion, not with same-sex intercourse per se; or that Paul’s remarks can be disregarded because we now know that homosexual orientations do not stem from excessive lust (N62). However, in antiquity “excess passion” never constituted an independent critique of same-sex intercourse. Passion was judged as excessive (e.g., the passion for sex with animals) on the basis of other criteria about behavioral limits. Otherwise, how could one determine which passions were in excess? There has to be some prior determination that something is wrong with the behavior in question in order to characterize it as excess passion. Paul likely viewed any shocking transgression of God-ordained boundaries to be — by definition — an overheating or excess of desire, in the sense of desiring something that God did not ordain humans to desire by virtue of creation intent and design.

### C. Why a “homosexual orientation” would not have mattered

Given the pervasive, strong, and absolute opposition of Scripture generally, and Paul particularly, to same-sex intercourse, the burden of proof ought to rest on those who contend that cognizance of sexual orientations would have made a difference to Paul’s views. As it is, the evidence indicates that such alleged “new knowledge” would not have made any significant difference to Paul’s assessment of homosexual intercourse — even if it could be established (and it cannot) that Paul

did not have the slightest inkling about the biologically related, exclusive character of some forms of same-sex attraction.

1. *What precisely is this "new knowledge"?* Modern socio-scientific evidence has *not* demonstrated that homoerotic "orientations" arise directly and primarily from congenital factors, whether genes, intrauterine hormonal influences, or special homosexual brains. Evidence to date suggests that congenital influence is largely indirect and subordinate to socialization factors, both microcultural (family and peer) and macrocultural (conventions, instructions, and sanctions). Limitations of space imposed on this essay do not permit the laying out of evidence; for that I refer the reader to other materials (N63). Here I simply quote briefly from three separate studies that I mention in my book:

(a) From J. Michael Bailey's latest identical twin study, which minimizes the sample bias of earlier twin studies, including his own: "In contrast to most prior twin studies of sexual orientation...ours did not provide statistically significant support for the importance of genetic factors" (N64).

(b) From David Greenberg's cross-cultural study of homosexuality: "Where social definitions of appropriate and inappropriate behavior are clear and consistent, with positive sanctions for conformity and negative ones for nonconformity, virtually everyone will conform irrespective of genetic inheritance and, to a considerable extent, irrespective of personal psychodynamics" (N65).

(c) From the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs, Laumann et al.), conducted mainly by University of Chicago researchers and commenting on the disparity in homosexual self-identification as one moves from rural to urban environments: "An environment that provides increased opportunities for and fewer negative sanctions against same-gender sexuality may both allow and even elicit expression of same-gender interest and sexual behavior" (N66).

No one is predestined from the womb to become homosexual. Parents, peers, societal expectations and sanctions, and a person's own incremental choices play the major role in determining whether homosexuality will develop for any given individual. The point to be made here is that biblical scholars, uninformed about both Greco-Roman theories of congenital causation and modern socio-scientific work, tend to exaggerate the distance between ancient and modern views. It turns out that the ancients were not so ignorant about sexual orientations, while we are not so informed about homosexual orientation as impervious to cultural manipulation. Suddenly the "new knowledge" does not look quite so new, with the result that claims of it justifying a radical shift in biblical interpretation carry much less weight.

2. *Calling some innate homoerotic desire “contrary to nature” in the ancient world.* Even some of the Greco-Roman texts theorizing biological influence designated the activity as contrary to nature. This was particularly the case with males who desired to be penetrated (cf. the Aristotelian texts, the medical text by Soranus, and the astrological texts). The ancients observed that not everything given *by nature* is constituted *according to nature* (cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1148b). Persons’ desires can be at odds with their essential sex. We still recognize the validity of such a distinction. Nature makes mistakes that are not in accord with its well-working processes; for example, severe congenital defects, disease, a predisposition toward alcoholism, and biologically related sexual attractions to children. Now, if these “pagan” texts could make such a distinction within a cultural milieu that did not indict severely *all* participants in homoerotic behavior, what is the likelihood that Paul would have stopped calling same-sex intercourse “contrary to nature” had he only known of a homosexual orientation? The idea is inconceivable, given that Paul operated within a scriptural and cultural milieu that regarded all same-sex intercourse as contrary to God’s creation design. Does anyone want to argue that Paul would have ended up *more* open to homosexual activity than his Greek and Roman counterparts when in fact he started with a more unequivocal view?

3. *Nature for Paul as something structurally broader than “sexual orientation.”* Paul too did not characterize all biologically related impulses as existing *according to nature*. He distinguished between, on the one hand, innate passions perverted by the fall and exacerbated by idol worship and, on the other hand, that part of material creation least likely to be marred by human sin. The latter would be the best indication of God’s intended structural design for human sexuality. Immediately following his reference to same-sex intercourse is a list of other vices that certainly have some innate basis — for example, covetousness, envy, and arrogance — and yet do not for that reason accord with nature (Rom1:29-31). Innate desires are notoriously unreliable indicators of God’s will, as an array of sexually impure impulses also proves. By *nature* Paul meant God’s intended design for creation, still visible and evident in material structures despite the introduction of sin into the world. Paul would never have described as *according to nature* a sexual orientation that, from a scriptural standpoint, was incompatible with essential embodied existence as a gendered being. There are two sexes, each structurally configured and open-ended to the other. Neither male sexuality nor female sexuality represents, by itself, whole sexuality. If a sexual merger with another is to be had, it must be with “the other half”

in order to become a sexually whole, “one flesh” being. The absence of a gender complement in same-sex intercourse and the attendant violation of the stamp of gender on the sexual self — the *malakoi* in 1 Corinthians 6:9 are an extreme case in point — are nature’s primary clues.

4. *The compatibility of Paul’s view of sin.* Even exaggerated claims about what we now know regarding homosexual orientation are essentially compatible with Paul’s own view of sin. In Romans 5 and 7 Paul speaks of sin as:

- a. An innate impulse
- b. Operating in the human body
- c. Transmitted by an ancestor human
- d. Never entirely within human control

In Paul’s understanding these elements do not disqualify an impulse from being sinful; they rather define sin as sin. Why then would the notion of biological causation for some homoerotic attraction have made any difference to Paul’s view of same-sex intercourse? If Paul could be transported into the twenty-first century and told that homoerotic desires have (at most) a partial and indirect connection to innate causation factors, he doubtless would have said either “I could have told you that” or at very least “That fits well into my own understanding of sin.”

5. *Applying the orientation argument to other sins.* The mere fact of an entrenched impulse not being consciously chosen by some is not grounds for its acceptance.

- Some alcoholism, criminal behavior, and a whole range of non-criminal vices (e.g., selfishness, jealousy, greed, lust) can be described along these lines.
- While some people are quite content with a single sex partner for life, large numbers of men and some women find it extraordinarily difficult to limit their number of life-time sex-partners to one, or even a dozen. Have they chosen this condition?
- Indirect congenital factors and early childhood experiences can significantly affect a person’s potential for entering into a committed, lifelong sexual union. We do not enter marriage on a level playing field.
- Most of us grow up with an aversion to having sex with close blood relations. “The common childish phrase that something is as unappealing as ‘kissing your own sister’ reflects a real, cross-

cultural, psychological phenomenon" (N67). Yet some do not have such an "instinctive" aversion. Did they choose not to have it?

- Dr. Fred Berlin, founder of the Sexual Disorders Clinic at Johns Hopkins and leading specialist on pedophilia, said in a recent interview (*People Magazine*, 4/15/02) that:

Sexual abuse during childhood is not the cause, but it is a risk factor. . . . The biggest misconception about pedophilia is that someone chooses to have it. . . . It's not anyone's fault that they have it, but it's their responsibility to do something about it. . . . Biological factors play into [the development of pedophilia]. . . . We've learned that you can successfully treat people with pedophilia, but you cannot cure them.

The bottom line is that discerning the morality of a given disposition has little to do with whether it is "fixed early in life." The latter should affect the degree of pastoral sensitivity but not whether the behavior should be condoned.

If it were otherwise, then consistency and logic would compel a radical departure from Christian ethics, at least as enunciated by Jesus and the early apostolic church. Henceforth, the ultimate consideration for determining the morality of a given behavior would be the degree to which the behavior emanated from an entrenched impulse, via congenital influences and/or early childhood socialization. So long as one could not prove, in advance and in scientifically measurable ways, inevitable and enduring harm — for this is the standard that pro-homosex advocates impose on "pro-comp" advocates — the actor's "orientation," of whatever kind, would define the morality of the act. Certainly from a Pauline perspective sin would cease to be sin. Commandments, whether from the teachings of Jesus or some other part of Scripture, would cease to be commandments in any meaningful sense. Humans would be little more than the sum total of their fleshly impulses, the measure of their own selves. What remaining significance the indwelling Spirit would have — if not to override fleshly impulses, crucify the self, and enable obedience in behavior to God's commands — I know not. Jesus Christ himself would be dethroned from the status of Lord. In his place constitutional predisposition would reign. The rightness or wrongness of various types of hitherto immoral sexual practices would depend largely on the particular sexual libidos of the actors, rather than on a God-given standard to which human sexual libidos are subjected. These are the implications just for sexual relations. Extend the same principles to other areas of ethics and the church is left with complete and utter moral chaos.

By now the conclusion should be clear: There is little to commend the “orientation argument” as a means of extracting exceptions to Scripture’s prohibition of homosexual practice. The evidence does not support the assumption that Paul could not have conceived of a relatively entrenched and exclusive form of homoeroticism — much less that knowledge of such would have caused Paul and all the other writers of Scripture to do a complete about-face on homosexual practice. The issue of structural complementarity — male and female as the respective halves to a sexual whole — is not materially affected by the presence or absence of a “homosexual orientation.”

## VII. Concluding Observations

I have made three main points in this essay:

1. Understood both within their historical context and in later interpretation by Jesus and Paul, the Genesis creation stories view sexual intercourse as something more than an activity designed for pleasure or for establishing durable bonds of intimacy. Sexual intercourse is about reemerging with another into a single sexual whole. Accordingly, these stories regard the presence of complementary sexual others, male and female, as an absolutely essential *prerequisite* for acceptable sexual intercourse. Homosexual relations are a necessarily sinful, extreme affront to this vision of normative sexual unions. While the creation stories may treat being in a sexual relationship with a person of the other sex as merely “the normal state of affairs,” they view the other-sex status of one’s sexual partner as nonnegotiable. Genesis 2:18, “it is not good for the human to be alone,” cannot be wrenched from its context and used to pry exceptions from this prescriptive biblical norm. At most Genesis 2:18 offers a *conditional* opportunity for sexual intimacy. The prerequisites for acceptable sexual intercourse, including an other-sex partner, must first be met.

2. That the Bible regards same-sex intercourse as *intrinsically* sinful, and not just normally or mildly so, is further confirmed by a discussion of the Levitical prohibitions, the nature argument in Romans 1:26-27, the terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* (1 Corinthians 6:9) in their literary context, and Paul’s recognition that some of his converts might experience an intense ongoing struggle with homoerotic impulses.

3. The notion that modern awareness of “homosexual orientation” challenges Scripture’s absolute prohibition of homosexual intercourse simply does not square with the evidence. It does not do justice to ancient theories of a biological basis for some homoerotic attraction, to the

wording of Paul's critique of same-sex intercourse in Romans 1:24-27, or to Paul's view of sin generally. In particular, it ignores the fact that in the ancient context, not to mention our own, even innate homoerotic impulses could be categorized as "contrary to nature" and sinful.

Persons in the church today who espouse a view of "exceptions" to a normative biblical prohibition of same-sex intercourse often locate themselves, as Mark Powell does, in the middle of a spectrum of "biblically consistent views," between the twin "extremes" of an absolute prohibition of same-sex intercourse and a complete annulment of the Bible's prohibition (pp. 38-39). Such posturing is self-deceiving. The evidence is overwhelming that *any* approval of homosexual behavior represents a "biblically inconsistent view," whether it is a matter of "exceptional" cases involving thousands or an embrace of every committed homosexual union. Far from occupying a putative middle, the "exceptions view" is not even at an end of a spectrum of biblically consistent views. It lies outside the spectrum. Maintaining Scripture's one and only absolute stance against all same-sex intercourse is no more extreme than maintaining an absolute stance against incest, adultery, plural marriages, pedophilia, sex with prostitutes, or bestiality — sexual behaviors that involve structural incongruities. One does not occupy the middle by making exceptions. One occupies the middle by loving those who commit sexual offenses and showing a readiness to restore the penitent without reprisal, while firmly rejecting the sinful behavior and expressing concern for the offender's inheritance of God's kingdom.

One also often hears from the prohomosex side: "Discussions of application of Scripture. . . are matters on which good and faithful Christians will disagree" (so Powell, pp. 33-34; cf. the book's title: *Faithful Conversation*). As applied to the issue of homosexual practice, the statement is premature, preemptive, and presumptuous. Yes, good and faithful Christians have leeway to disagree about various important, yet non-essential, applications of Scripture (e.g., as regards mainline denominational differences over baptism and the Eucharist). But no, not every disagreement about the application of Scripture can be described as a dispute within the circle of "good and faithful Christians." Some applications can be grossly unfaithful, despite the best intentions of the interpreters, and can lead to catastrophic results for the community of faith.

Again, the example of incest in 1 Corinthians 5 is a case in point. In other respects, the Corinthian believers may have been faithful (cf. 11:2). Yet in this particular issue they had seriously departed from the faith. The incestuous man's erroneous application of the gospel had led



him to commit behavior that endangered his salvation. Given Paul's vigorous response, there can be little doubt that, had the Corinthians not withdrawn their support for his behavior, they would have severed themselves from communities of faith elsewhere and exposed themselves to the fearful judgment of God.

This is precisely the situation that the ELCA and other mainline denominations now find themselves in as they contemplate departing from Scripture's unequivocal witness against homosexual practice. Remaining faithful to the core value that God intends sexually intimate relationships for, and only for, the remerging of complementary sexual others into a sexual whole is a gravely serious matter on which the fate of the church and many individuals rest. This belief is a foundational starting point for all sexual ethics. It is assuredly not a matter of indifference over which faithful Christians can agree to disagree. May the church not deceive itself into thinking otherwise.

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<sup>1</sup> At approximately 42,000 words, my original essay was too long to be incorporated in its entirety into this volume. Accordingly, I have placed sections I-III of the original, plus the notes for sections IV-VI, on my website at <http://www.robagnon.net>. For the convenience of readers of this essay I give short summaries below of sections I-III. For sections IV-VI, I have inserted note numbers at the appropriate points in this essay, corresponding to note numbers in the online copy (e.g., "N1" designating note 1 online). Readers do not need to consult the online material in order to make sense of this essay, though the online material will provide further elucidation of various points. Readers who do not have access to the Internet and would like to make arrangements for securing a paper copy of the online material can contact the author at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 616 N. Highland Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15206-2596.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.robagnon.net>

<sup>3</sup> In order of degree of engagement with the specifics of Powell's argument, from least to the greatest, readers will encounter:

- *Section VI. Why the Sexual Orientation Argument Does Not Work.* This section treats Powell's arguments only marginally, for two reasons: (1) Powell does not have much new to say about the orientation issue; and (2) nearly all of section VI was originally written with my recent Fortress Press essay in mind. The discussion in section VI is essential for assessing the correctness of Powell's position. But it is of equal relevance for

any prohomosex argument that touts “homosexual orientation” as a significant reason for overturning the Bible’s witness against same-sex intercourse.

- *Section IV. The Male-Female Prerequisite in the Genesis Creation Stories.* Only the last subsection of section IV (“F. Implications for Powell’s view”) specifically deals with Powell’s arguments regarding Genesis 2:18-24. Since Powell makes the strongest case — relatively speaking — for a (partly) prohomosex reading of this text, it is fitting that I focus the final subsection on his work.

- *Section V. The Rest of the Case For Regarding Same-Sex Intercourse as Intrinsically Sinful.* This section is heavily engaged with the main exegetical argument of Powell’s essay because Powell is the strongest advocate — again, relatively speaking — for the view that the Bible’s stance on same-sex intercourse, while normative, does not preclude the possibility of exceptions. Yet even this section can stand alone as a coherent argument against any prohomosex attempt to restrict the biblical prohibition to certain kinds of homosexual practice.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.robagnon.net>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.