

# Why a New Translation of the Heidelberg Catechism Is Not Needed: And Why Homosexualist Forces in the PCUSA Seek It

by Robert A. J. Gagnon, Ph.D.  
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, PA 15206-2596  
[gagnon@pts.edu](mailto:gagnon@pts.edu)

June 19, 2008

Homosexualist forces (i.e. groups advocating for full acceptance of immorality of homosexual practice) have pushed through seven overtures seeking a retranslation of the Heidelberg Catechism. In my presbytery, the Pittsburgh Presbytery, the overture was sponsored by two homosexualist "Covenant Network" churches (East Liberty Presbyterian and Sixth Presbyterian).

## Why the Push for Retranslation?

Why the vigorous push for a retranslation? The Pittsburgh overture, as an example, alleges four problems in the 1962 English translation by Arthur Miller and Eugene Osterhaven. However, the first three are just smokescreens to get at the real reason for calling for a retranslation; namely, to eliminate from the confessions explicit negative reference to homosexual practice. (Some homosexualist advocates, for example, Jack Rogers, claim that among the confessions in the *Book of Confession* only the Heidelberg Catechism mentions homosexuality.<sup>1</sup> This is false. The question-and-answer 139 of the Larger Catechism includes "sodomy and all unnatural lusts," footnoting Rom 1:26-27 and Lev 20:15-16, among "the sins forbidden in the seventh commandment" [7.249].)

## What the Original German and English Translation of the Catechism Say and How It Compares with 1 Cor 6:9

In question 87 the Heidelberg Catechism (4.086) asks: "Can those who do not turn to God from their ungrateful, impenitent life be saved?" **A literal English**

---

<sup>1</sup> Jack Rogers, "The Importance of Restoring the Heidelberg Catechism to Its Original Text" (June 17, 2008; 4 pgs.; online: [http://www.drjackrogers.com/files/the\\_importance\\_of\\_restoring\\_the\\_heidelberg\\_catechism.doc](http://www.drjackrogers.com/files/the_importance_of_restoring_the_heidelberg_catechism.doc)).

**translation of the original German** of the authors of the Catechism, Zacharias Ursinus and Kaspar Olevianus, reads:

"By no means! Because Scripture states that no idolater, adulterer, thief, drunkard, or slanderer will inherit the kingdom of God."<sup>2</sup>

However, instead of rendering the text this way the **1962 English translation of the Heidelberg Catechism** inserted the New English Bible text of 1 Cor 6:9-10:

"Certainly not! Scripture says, "Surely you know that the unjust will never come into possession of the kingdom of God. Make no mistake: no fornicator or idolater, none who are guilty either of adultery or of homosexual perversion, no thieves or grabbers or drunkards or slanderers or swindlers will possess the kingdom of God."

The original German is clearly alluding to 1 Cor 6:9-10. It lists as reference texts 1 Cor 6:9-10, Eph 5:5-6, and 1 John 3:14, but only the list in 1 Cor 6:9-10 corresponds to the order and use of the offender groups in the German.

Here is a literal translation of **1 Cor 6:9-10**, with offenders not picked up in the German original of Heidelberg Catechism A 87 put in boldface:

"Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Don't be deceiving yourselves [or: do not be deceived, make no mistake]: Neither **the sexually immoral** [*pornoi*], nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor **soft men** [*malakoi*], nor **men who lie with a male** [*arsenokoitai*], nor thieves, nor **the covetous** [or: greedy persons: *pleonektoi*], not drunkards, not slanderers, not **swindlers** [or: robbers; literally, "snatchers": *harpages*] shall inherit the kingdom of God."

I will begin by making a few comments on my translation. The Greek word behind my translation "the sexually immoral" is *pornoi*. In the New Testament the word is a general term for sexual immorality that English translations sometimes mistakenly constrict to "fornicators." Here it includes not only the three sexual offenders mentioned after idolaters but also the incestuous man in 1 Cor 5:9-11 (who is called a  *pornos*), men who have sex with a prostitute (*porne*) in 1 Cor 6:15-17, and men who have sex outside of marriage in 1 Cor 7:2 (*porneia*). The Greek word behind my translation "soft men" is *malakoi*. In context it refers to men who feminize themselves to serve as the passive or

---

<sup>2</sup> So Prof. Andreas K. Schuele at Union Seminary in Virginia.

receptive sexual partners of other men. "Men who lie with a male" is a literal translation of *arsenokoitai*, a distinctly Jewish and Christian term formulated from the absolute prohibitions of homosexual practice in Lev 18:22 and 20:13: "You shall not lie with a male (*arsen*) as lying [*koite*] with a woman."

### **Would There Be a Push for Retranslation If the English Translation of the Catechism Had Inserted Only "the Covetous" and "the Greedy" into the Original German in accord with 1 Cor 6:9?**

Now the German text of Heidelberg A 87 leaves out five offender groups:

- "The sexually immoral" ("fornicators")
- "Soft men"
- "Men who lie with a male"
- "The covetous [or: greedy]"
- "Swindlers [or: robbers]"

The "Covenant Network" churches who want a new translation more faithful to the original German would not be asking for a new translation if the 1962 English translation had inserted into the German text, from 1 Cor 6:9-10, only "the sexually immoral," "the covetous/greedy," and "swindlers," or at least only the last two. Why? Because they would agree that such things should be prohibited. They would rightly reason that even though the translators of the 1962 English translation had added these offender groups to the German of the catechism, such an addition is in keeping both with the Scripture on which the German is based and with the church's historic teaching.

They would also reason, correctly, that Ursinus and Olevianus could not have left out any of these terms because of any theological disagreement with Scripture. Probably "swindlers/robbers" was omitted simply because of a perceived overlap with the term for "thieves," already mentioned. The reason for omitting "the covetous/greedy" is not as obvious; at any rate, it could hardly have had anything to do with approving of greed. Perhaps it was omitted because of the misunderstanding that it might have raised; namely, that *any* feeling of covetousness or greed could exclude one from God's kingdom when, in fact, Paul had in view only extreme instances of serial, unrepentant hoarding and exploitation.

### **Textual Purists or Ideologically Driven Propagandists?**

The fact that the "Covenant Network" churches would almost certainly not have called for a new translation if only "the covetous" and "swindlers" were added (and perhaps "the sexually immoral") underscores that they did not introduce the overture because they are translation purists or sticklers for reading a text

precisely. They have little interest in assessing the evidence that I have put together that contends that Paul's references to *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* in 1 Cor 6:9 collectively take in every form of male-male intercourse (for a brief summary of the evidence see the appendix). They also show no desire to acknowledge the obvious rhetorical import of *singling out from "among" "the historic confessional standards of the church"* the ordination "requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness." In short, they consistently read against the grain of texts in order to get their ideological way. That is their only interest here: the desire to remove from the confessions whatever does not conform to their own support for homosexual practice.

### **The Real Reason Why the Catechism Omits "Soft Men" and "Men Who Lie with a Male": Protection of Children from Obscene Material**

As with the Catechism's omission of the "covetous/greedy" and "swindlers/robbers," the omission of "sexually immoral persons [or: fornicators]," "soft men," and "men who lie with a male" can have had nothing to do with a desire to affirm fornication, incest, sex with prostitutes, and homosexual practice. The only logical reason for sixteenth-century reformers to omit terms having to do with sexual immorality, especially homosexual practice, is that these behaviors were viewed as obscene and thus wholly inappropriate to mention, especially in a catechism that would be used to instruct children. Calvin himself, when he comments on Rom 1:26-27, 1 Cor 6:9, and Jude 7 in his commentaries, does so only in an oblique way, referring to desires and actions that are "monstrous," "polluted," "most filthy and detestable," and "the most abominable."<sup>3</sup> Even as late as the early twentieth century, the Loeb Classical Library published by Harvard University Press would routinely render Greek classical texts into Latin rather than English whenever coming across favorable discussions of homosexual practice. The reason: such material was regarded as obscene and likely to corrupt young minds.

So commissioning a new translation of the Heidelberg Confession for the obvious purpose of getting rid of any reference to "homosexual perversion" gets things precisely backwards; namely that the omission of the terms for homosexual practice in 1 Cor 6:9 is a reflection of how bad and obscene Ursinus and Olevianus, among all other reformers of the day, thought homosexual practice was.

---

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Winfield Casey Jones helpfully reminds readers of this point in his discussion, p. 5 n. 8 at <http://www.presbyweb.com/2008/Viewpoint/Casey+Jones-Heidelbergger.doc>. However, he is not credible from an historical vantage point in asserting that one "possible" reason for the omission is that Ursinus and Olevianus did not think Scripture spoke "against same gender sex"; and terribly naive in his assessments of the motivation of those who put forward this overture.

## **Conclusion: New Translation Would Only Service Homosexualist Agenda and Distort the Original Intent of the Reformers**

Since no one would be calling for a retranslation of the Heidelberg Catechism if only the "covetous" and "swindlers" had been added to the German text by English translators in keeping with 1 Cor 6:9, there is no need to call for a retranslation on the basis that a term for homosexual practice was added to the German text in keeping with 1 Cor 6:9. Producing a new translation of the Heidelberg Catechism for the obvious singular purpose of removing the phrase "homosexual perversion" would be a one-sided concession to an ideological agendas that have shown little interest in studying the strong and numerous arguments for a male-female prerequisite in Scripture, in reading the *Book of Order's* ordination standard for sexuality in a reasonable way, or in discerning the apparent historical motivation behind the omission of terms for homosexual practice in the Heidelberg Catechism's allusion to 1 Cor 6:9-10. Ironically, those who most loudly trumpet their desire to put Spirit over Letter are here attempting to put Letter over Spirit. The spirit of the text of the Catechism is clear enough. It is the exact opposite of the attempt now being made to make the Confessions open to homosexual practice.

The attempt at retranslation is not about history and honesty but ideology and a homosexualist agenda.

# Appendix

## A Brief Review of How We Know That 1 Corinthians 6:9 Rejects All Homosexual Practice

*The terms malakoi ("soft men") and arsenokoitai ("men who lie with a male") in 1 Cor 6:9 are clearly inclusive of all homosexual bonds, understood in their historical and literary contexts. Detailed documentation for each of the arguments below can be found elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> As regards the meaning of malakoi (lit., "soft men," in the sense of men who feminize themselves to attract male sex partners) note:*

1. ***Its place in the vice list amidst other participants in illicit sexual intercourse.*** It is probable that *malakoi* has to do with immoral sexual relations since it is sandwiched in between, on the one side, the terms *pornoi* (sexually immoral persons, including the incestuous man in 5:9-11 and men who have sex with a prostitute in 6:15-17) and *moichoi* (adulterers) and, on the other side, *arsenokoitai* (men who lie with a male).
2. ***Its pairing with the immediately following word arsenokoitai.*** Since *arsenokoitai* means "men who lie with a male" as a reference to the active, insertive partners in male-male intercourse, it is likely that *malakoi* refers to the passive, receptive partner in such intercourse. Indeed, the two preceding terms *eidololatrai* (idolaters) and *moichoi* (adulterers) form a natural pair in the Old Testament, making more probable the pairing of the next two terms, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*.
3. ***Philo of Alexandria's use of cognate words.*** Philo (a first-century Jewish philosopher) uses terms related to *malakos* to refer to men who actively feminize themselves for the purpose of attracting other men: *malakia* and *malakotēs*, "softness"; also: *anandria*, "unmanliness," *hoi paschontes*, "those who are 'done'" [as opposed to the "doers," *hoi drōntes*], and *androgynoi*, "men-women" (cf. *Special Laws* 3.37-42; *On Abraham* 135-36; *Contemplative Life* 59-61).<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 303-36; some updating in *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 81-83 with online notes 96-111 in 2003b, "Notes to Gagnon's Essay in the Gagnon-Via *Two Views* Book" (50 pgs.; online: <http://www.robagnon.net/2Views/HomoViaRespNotesRev.pdf>), 22-25; "A Comprehensive and Critical Review Essay of *Homosexuality, Science, and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture, Part 2*," *HBT* 25 (2003): 226-39 (also online: <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/homoBalchHBTReview2.pdf>);

<sup>5</sup> Texts translated in Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 172-75.

4. **Greco-Roman usage of *malakoi* and the parallel Latin word *molles* (soft men).** The Greek word *malakoi* and the Latin word *molles* could be used broadly to refer to effeminate or unmanly men. But in specific contexts it could be used in ways similar to the more specific terms *cinaedi* (lit., “butt-shakers”) and *pathici* (“those who undergo [penetration]”) to denote effeminate *adult* males who are biologically and/or psychologically disposed to desire penetration by men. For example, in Soranus’s work *On Chronic Diseases* the section on men who desire to be penetrated (4.9.131-37) is entitled “On the *molles* or *subacti* (subjugated or penetrated partners, pathics) whom the Greeks call *malthakoi*.” An Aristotelian text similarly refers to those who are anatomically inclined toward the receptive role as *malakoi* (Pseudo-Aristotle, *Problems* 4.26). Astrological texts that speak of males desirous of playing the penetrated female role also use the term *malakoi* (Ptolemy, *Four Books* 3.14 §172; Vettius Valens, *Anthologies* 2.37.54; 2.38.82).<sup>6</sup> The complaint about such figures in the ancient world generally, and certainly by Philo, centers around their attempted erasure of the masculine stamp given them by God/nature, not their exploitation of others, age difference, or acts of prostitution.

As regards the meaning of *arsenokoitai* (literally, “men lying [*koitē*] with a male [*arsēn*]”) note:

1. **Clear connections to the Levitical prohibitions of male-male intercourse.** The word is formed from the Greek words for “lying” (*koitē*) and “male” (*arsēn*) that appear in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Levitical prohibitions of men “lying with a male” (18:22; 20:13). The intentional link to the absolute Levitical prohibitions against man-male intercourse is self-evident from the following points: (1) The rabbis used the corresponding Hebrew abstract expression *mishkav zakūr*, “lying of/with a male,” drawn from the Hebrew texts of Lev 18:22 and 20:13. (2) The term or its cognates does not appear in any non-Jewish, non-Christian text prior to the sixth century C.E. This way of talking about male homosexuality is a distinctly Jewish and Christian formulation. It was undoubtedly used as a way of distinguishing their absolute opposition to homosexual practice, rooted in the Torah of Moses, from more accepting views in the Greco-Roman milieu. (3) The appearance of *arsenokoitai* in 1 Tim 1:10 makes the link to the Mosaic law explicit, since the list of vices of which *arsenokoitai* is a part are said to be derived from “the law” (1:9).

---

<sup>6</sup> Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 126 n. 41, 260 n. 132.

2. ***The implications of the context in early Judaism.*** That Jews of the period construed the Levitical prohibitions of male-male intercourse absolutely and against a backdrop of a male-female requirement is beyond dispute. For example, Josephus explained to Gentile readers that “the law [of Moses] recognizes only sexual intercourse that is according to nature, that which is with a woman. . . . But it abhors the intercourse of males with males” (*Against Apion* 2.199). There are no limitations placed on the prohibition as regards age, slave status, idolatrous context, or exchange of money. The only limitation is the sex of the participants. According to *b. Sanh.* 54a, the male with whom a man lays in Lev 18:22 and 20:13 may be “an adult or minor,” meaning that the prohibition of male-male unions is not limited to pederasty. Indeed, there is no evidence in ancient Israel, Second Temple Judaism, or rabbinic Judaism that any limitation was placed on the prohibition of man-male intercourse.
3. ***The choice of word: arsenokoitai not pederasts.*** Had a more limited meaning been intended—for example, pederasts—the terms *paiderastai* (“lover of boys”), *paidomanai* (“men mad for boys”), or *paidophthoroi* (“corrupters of boys”) could have been chosen.
4. ***The meaning of arsenokoitai and cognates in extant usage.*** The term *arsenokoites* and cognates after Paul (the term appears first in Paul) are applied solely to male-male intercourse but, consistent with the meaning of the partner term *malakoi*, not limited to pederasts or clients of cult prostitutes.<sup>7</sup> This includes the translations of *arsenokoitai* in 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 in Latin, Syriac, and Coptic.
5. ***Implications of the parallel in Rom 1:24-27.*** It is absurd to interpret the meaning of *arsenokoitai* in 1 Cor 6:9 without consideration of the broad indictment of male-male intercourse expounded in Rom 1:27 (“males with males”).
6. ***Implications from the context of 1 Cor 5-7.*** This absolute and inclusive sense is further confirmed by the broader context of 1 Cor 5-7: (1) the parallel case of incest in ch. 5, which gives no exceptions for committed, loving unions and echoes both Levitical and Deuteronomic law; (2) the vice list in 6:9-10, where sexual offenders are distinguished from idolaters, consent is presumed, and a warning is given to believers not to engage in such behavior any longer; (3) the analogy to sex with a prostitute in 6:12-20, where Gen 2:24 is cited as the absolute norm (about a man being joined to a woman and “the two shall become one flesh”) and the Christian identity of the offender is presumed (so it cannot

---

<sup>7</sup> See specifics in Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 317-23.



- be said that Paul is opposed only to pagan homosexual practice); and (4) the issue of marriage in ch. 7, which presumes throughout that sex is confined to male-female marriage.
7. ***The relevance of 1 Cor 11:2-16.*** If inappropriate hairstyles or head coverings were a source of shame because they compromised the sexual differences of men and women, how much more would a man taking another man to bed be a shameful act, lying with another male “as though lying with a woman”? Paul did not make head coverings an issue vital for inclusion in God’s kingdom, but he did put same-sex intercourse on that level.
  8. ***Implications of 1 Tim 1:9-10 corresponding to the Decalogue.*** At least the last half of the vice list in 1 Tim 1:8-10 (and possibly the whole of it) corresponds to the Decalogue. Why is that important? In early Judaism and Christianity the Ten Commandments often served as summary headings for the full range of laws in the Old Testament. The seventh commandment against adultery, which was aimed at guarding the institution of marriage, served as a summary of all biblical sex laws, including the prohibition of man-male intercourse. The vice of kidnapping, which follows *arsenokoitai* in 1 Tim 1:10, is typically classified under the eighth commandment against stealing (so Philo, *Pseudo-Phocylides*, the rabbis, and the *Didache*).<sup>8</sup> This makes highly improbable the attempt by some to pair *arsenokoitai* with the following term *andrapodistai* (kidnappers, men-stealers), as a way of limiting its reference to exploitative acts of man-male intercourse,<sup>9</sup> rather than with the inclusive sexual term *pornoi* (the sexually immoral) that precedes it.
  9. ***The implication of the meaning of malakoi.*** If the term *malakoi* is not limited in its usage to boys or to men who are exploited by other men, then *arsenokoitai* certainly cannot be limited to men who have sex with boys or slaves.
  10. ***Sex with adult males as worse than sex with adolescent boys.*** In the Greco-Roman world homosexual intercourse between an adult male and a male youth was regarded as a *less* exploitative form of same-sex *eros* than intercourse between two adult males. The key problem with homosexual intercourse—behaving toward the passive male partner as if the latter were female—was exacerbated when the intercourse was aimed at adult males who had outgrown the “softness” of immature adolescence. Consequently, even if *arsenokoitai* primarily had in mind man-boy love

---

<sup>8</sup> See Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 335-36.

<sup>9</sup> Contra Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 119-20.

(and from all that we have said above, there is no evidence that it does), then, *a fortiori*, it would surely also take in man-man love.

Although lacking the degree of documentation that I supply above, Dan O. Via, a New Testament scholar supportive of homosexual unions, rightly states:

The Pauline texts . . . do not support this limitation of male homosexuality to pederasty. Moreover, some Greek sources suggest that—at least in principle—a relationship should not be begun until the boy is almost grown and should be lifelong. . . . I believe that [Richard] Hays is correct in holding that *arsenokoites* [in 1 Cor 6:9] refers to a man who engages in same-sex intercourse. . . . True the meaning of a compound word does not necessarily add up to the sum of its parts ([Dale] Martin 119). But in this case I believe the evidence suggests that it does. . . . First Cor[inthians] 6:9-10 simply classifies homosexuality as a moral sin that finally keeps one out of the kingdom of God.<sup>10</sup>

Even Walter Wink, in his otherwise mean-spirited review of my book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, had to admit:

Gagnon exegetes every biblical text even remotely relevant to the theme [of homosexual practice]. This section is filled with exegetical insights. I have long insisted that . . . efforts to twist the text to mean what it clearly does not say are deplorable. Simply put, the Bible is negative toward same-sex behavior, and there is no getting around it. . . . Gagnon imagines a request from the Corinthians to Paul for advice [about how they should respond to a man in a loving and committed union with another man], based on 1 Corinthians 5:1-5. “. . . When you mentioned that *arsenokoitai* would be excluded from the coming kingdom of God, you were not including somebody like this man, were you?” . . . No, Paul wouldn't accept that relationship for a minute.<sup>11</sup>

A great irony in the attempt to remove mention of homosexual practice in the Heidelberg Catechism is that it treats the clear witness of Scripture as secondary to the confessions.

Recent works on the Bible and homosexual practice by two Presbyterian professors have completely ignored the arguments and evidence that I have put forward in several publications: Jack Rogers's *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) and William Stacy Johnson's *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). Neither is a biblical scholar and both clearly lack the expertise necessary to evaluate the matter. In treating 1 Cor 6:9 (Rogers: pp. 73-75; Johnson: pp. 131-

---

<sup>10</sup> Via, *Homosexuality and the Bible*, 11, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Wink, "To Hell with Gays?" *Christian Century* 119.13 (2002): 33; for my rebuttal of his review see "Gays and the Bible: A Response to Walter Wink," *Christian Century* 119.17 (2002): 40-43; "Are There Universally Valid Sex Precepts? A Critique of Walter Wink's Views on the Bible and Homosexuality," *HBT* 24 (2002): 72-125 (also online: <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/homoWinkHBTResp.pdf>)

33) both are entirely beholden to the work of previous biblical scholars whose work I have already extensively rebutted (Rogers relying on Martti Nissinen, Dale Martin, and Victor Furnish; Johnson relying on Robin Scroggs).<sup>12</sup> Rogers and Johnson make no attempt to respond to any of my critiques of the work of these scholars or any of the other arguments that I put forward.

---

<sup>12</sup> Rogers also cites Brian Blount but Blount has done no critical work on the subject of any importance. Finally, Rogers cites Prof. Marion Soards of Louisville Seminary as someone from the anti-homosex side who allegedly thinks that 1 Cor 6:9 has “no direct application to faithful, God-loving, twenty-first-century Christians who are homosexual” (75-76). However, Prof. Soards communicated to me in an email dated 6/10/06: “Rogers does not seem to read my intentions with clarity. . . but if anything I am more than ever persuaded of the relevance of the range of OT/NT texts for the current discussion of homosexual behavior. Actually to put it succinctly, I find your own analysis/exegesis persuasive.”