

## **The Presbyterian News Service: The Need for Neutrality: A Critique of a Reporter's Uninformed Bias**

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*The following appeared as a column in the [Oct. 25, 2003 edition of Presbyweb](#).*

Mr. John Filiatreau, a reporter for the Presbyterian News Service, has apparently dashed off an article (dated Oct. 21, 2003) entitled "[Task Force Sex Talk Rated G](#)," about the Presbyterian Theological Task Force's recent deliberations on homosexuality. The "news" as depicted by Mr. Filiatreau—the article actually does come under the heading of *News*—is not news but an infomercial for the views represented by the Covenant Network (a pro-homosex lobby group within the PCUSA). I expect better from our Presbyterian news service.

The Task Force reviewed six articles on the Bible and homosexuality: articles by Jeffrey Siker, Thomas Schmidt, Luke Timothy Johnson, Helmut Thielicke, Andrew Sullivan, and me. The article written by me was: "The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Theology, Analogies, and Genes" (published in the [Nov/Dec 2001 issue of \*Theology Matters\*](#)).

Some in the Task Force made misleading charges about my work, which Mr. Filiatreau played up. His subtitle "Group . . . eschews 'caricature and stereotype'" is problematic in view of the fact that some in the Task Force did "caricature and stereotype" my work. I will deal with this at another time. My concern here, however, is Mr. Filiatreau's own "caricature and stereotype" of my work. He reviewed what members of the Task Force said about each of the other five articles with little or no added commentary of his own. However, when he came to my article, which the Task Force gave more time to than any other article, Mr. Filiatreau chose to contribute an extensive partisan commentary under the guise of "news." His attack on my scholarship is brazen enough to merit a response. He alleges that:

- My article is a "16 [*sic*—13]-page polemic"
- Gagnon "contends, largely without presenting supporting evidence. . ."
- My article "is written to a . . . less academic standard"
- "The only one of the six [articles] to take an aggressive, frankly polemic tone" is Gagnon's
- "In Gagnon's view, homosexuals are petulant"
- Gagnon "has no compunctions about putting words into others' mouths"
- "Gagnon hedges many of his claims to such a degree that little meaning remains"
- "The receptive audience apparently emboldened Gagnon to make a number of broad claims about homosexuality without presenting evidence in their support"
- Gagnon "draws direct correlations by assertion"
- Gagnon "makes claims so sweeping that their meaning is obscure"

I will reply to these caricatures in the eight points below.

1. *Polemical or rigorous?* Mr. Filiatreau contends—polemically and tendentiously, I might add—that my article was “the only one of the six to take an aggressive, frankly polemic tone.”

I encourage Mr. Filiatreau to take a harder look at the articles by Andrew Sullivan, Jeff Siker, and Luke Johnson, as well as at his own writing style. Sullivan, Siker, and Johnson—like Mr. Filiatreau—are no less convinced about the rightness of their (pro-homosex) position and the wrongness of those who disagree with them. Their exegesis of Scripture and hermeneutical argumentation may be less precise than mine but their work is not more irenic.

As regards Mr. Filiatreau’s complaint about my “tone,” I don’t believe that this is the real issue. I point to the need for God to form Christ in all of us, not just homosexuals. I acknowledge several times the great difficulty that many have in struggling with homoerotic desires or other scripturally proscribed urges. And I call upon the church to make greater strides in providing for intimacy needs of all single persons, not just homosexuals. I recognize the need for all of us to wrestle with struggles and temptations, both heterosexual and homosexual.

Where are the specific examples of inappropriate tone? If Mr. Filiatreau finds it offensive that I say that the homosexuality debate is about whether Jesus Christ or a misguided biological determinism shall be lord, so be it. There is a lot about the gospel to which people take offense. We all are humbled and silenced by much of the language about sin in the Bible. I think, for example, about Paul’s “tone” regarding same-sex intercourse in Romans 1:24-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 or regarding the case of adult, consensual incest in 1 Corinthians 5. We should also think about Jesus’ tone on sexual immorality in Matthew 5:27-32. By comparison my tone is quite mild.

2. *Is homosexuality like ethnicity, sex, and eye color?* Mr. Filiatreau further claims that I contend, “largely without presenting supporting evidence,” that homosexual identity, unlike ethnicity, gender, and eye color, is (in my words) “not an inevitable product of one’s birth but rather is largely shaped by familial and extra-familial cultural/environmental factors.”

This is a most puzzling contention on Mr. Filiatreau’s part. My article provides over 2000 words of supporting documentation (pp. 9-12)—none of which Mr. Filiatreau or any member of the Task Force demonstrates to be in error. In fact, what separates my article from the other articles read by the Task Force is that it was the only one that substantiated claims about sexual orientation with reference to socio-scientific evidence. I believe that we need to employ socio-scientific research as well as sound biblical hermeneutics, and I have done so. (Schmidt does so also, and quite well, in chapters of his book *Straight and Narrow?* that the Task Force did not assign.) I refer to:

- The weaknesses of the “homosexual brain” and “homosexual gene” studies

- The evidence from the latest and best of the identical twin studies. See now the most recent, and largest, representative study of same-sex attraction in twins, done by researchers from Columbia and Yale (2002), which concludes that “less gendered socialization” in childhood, not genetic or hormonal influences, plays the dominant role in the development of same-sex attraction. “If same-sex romantic attraction has a genetic component, it is massively overwhelmed by other factors” (Peter S. Bearman and Hannah Brückner, “Opposite-Sex Twins and Adolescent Same-Sex Attraction,” *American Journal of Sociology* 107:5 [2002]: 1179-1205).
- The exotic-becomes-erotic theory by Daryl Bem (professor of psychology at Cornell, who is, incidentally homosexual)
- Some psychoanalytic thought on developmental causes of homosexuality
- David Greenberg’s massive cross-cultural study
- The conclusions of the researchers for the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey
- The views of Kinsey and the Kinsey Institute
- The work of reparative therapists and transformation ministries. See, for example: Warren Throckmorton, “Attempts to Modify Sexual Orientation: A Review of Outcome Literature and Ethical Issues,” *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* 20 (1998): 283-304; idem, “Initial Empirical and Clinical Findings Concerning the Change Process for Ex-Gays,” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 33/3 (June 2002): 242-48; and now also Robert L. Spitzer, “Can Some Gay Men and Lesbians Change Their Sexual Orientation? 200 Participants Reporting a Change from Homosexual to Heterosexual Orientation,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 32 (2003): 403-17.

Obviously in a short article there are limitations to what can be presented so I sometimes referred readers to my book for further documentation. If neither Mr. Filiatreau nor the pro-homosex members of the Task Force want to check these references, surely that is not my fault.

This discussion must be done with more information, not less; more rigorous thinking, not less. Frankly, it amazes me that there are still people around who think that homoerotic desire is as much an inevitable product of birth as ethnicity, gender, and eye color. Not even homosexual scientists like Simon LeVay or Dean Hamer believe this. We must not continue to make “reasoned” arguments based on inaccurate information.

3. *Low academic standard?* Mr. Filiatreau, as a journalist, states that my article does not reach the “academic standard” set by the other six articles—which he attributes partly (but only partly) to the venue for my initial presentation.

I note at the beginning of the article that it was “adapted” from my workshop at the Presbyterian Coalition Gathering on October 1, 2001. *Adapted* means that it is not precisely the same talk but reworked for a broader audience. The Coalition audience has nothing to do with the quality of the article. I could have easily given a similar

presentation before a Covenant Network meeting—and, in so doing, I would have elevated the quality of exegesis and hermeneutics that normally goes on in that venue. The academic quality of my article is not in the least bit inferior to that of the other five articles read by the Task Force. For example, I invite Mr. Filiatreau or anyone on the Task Force to show how Jeff Siker’s case for Gentile inclusion is superior to my critique of it or to my preferred analogue of adult incest.

Obviously my 520-page book offers readers a more full-length discussion of a range of issues. Nevertheless, this article does a good job of summarizing—and, at points, building on—the discussion in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* regarding the use of analogies (pp. 441-52) and the “sexual orientation argument” (pp. 395-432). At no point does Mr. Filiatreau or the Task Force members critical of my article *establish* that my arguments were flawed. I will grant their misrepresentation of my article, their emotive and unreasoned reaction, and their unsubstantiated claims. But I do not believe that there has been substantive rebuttal. Anybody can allege a flawed presentation. But without proof it becomes nothing more than name-calling.

4. *Putting words into Paul’s mouth?* Mr. Filiatreau, again in his role as a reporter, tendentiously states that I “have no compunctions about putting words into others’ mouths,” such as when I conclude, based on literary and historical evidence, that current “sexual orientation” theory would not have changed Paul’s views on homosexual practice. (Incidentally, “sexual orientation” is merely the directedness of sexual impulses at any given stage of one’s life and should properly apply not just to choice of gender but also to such matters as age and number of sex partners.)

I could agree with Mr. Filiatreau, but only if I discard an overwhelming cumulative case supporting my observation. I would have to disregard the facts that:

- There were many theories in the ancient world surmising congenital influence on some or all forms of homoerotic desire
- There were known lifelong homosexuals in antiquity
- There were notable examples of nonexploitative homosexual relationships in antiquity and wide-ranging discussions about the beauty of male-male intercourse
- Paul in Romans 5 and 7 regarded sin precisely as an innate impulse, running through the members of the human body, passed on by an ancestor, and never entirely within human control
- There are strong intertextual echoes to Genesis 1:26-28 and Genesis 2:18-24 behind Paul’s indictment to same-sex intercourse in Romans 1:24-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9
- Paul’s reason for opposing same-sex intercourse had to do with its “same-sexness”; that is, the attempt to merge erotically with a sexual same, with what one already is as a sexual being, rather than with a complementary sexual other.

Given these considerations, the ones who are guilty of eisegesis (reading into the text something that is not there) and hermeneutical error (misapplying the text in our context),

are those who contend that our alleged “new knowledge” about homosexuality might have, or would have, made a major difference to the authors of Scripture. The strong burden of proof is on them to establish such a contention, inasmuch as we are clearly dealing here with a countercultural core value in biblical sexual ethics. Otherwise the authority of Scripture means nothing.

Take the following analogy: Who would be guilty of putting words into Jesus’ mouth—someone who argued that we cannot know what Jesus might have thought about a case of adult, consensual incest or someone who argued that we can know, despite the absence of an explicit Jesus saying to that effect?

5. *Are we dictating to God?* Mr. Filiatreau says that I characterize homosexuals as “petulant.” This is his term, not mine. What I do say is that: *Any* attempt at claiming that one has a right to violate core values of Scripture on the basis of an allegedly intractable desire is an attempt at “dictating to God what one needs in life to be happy.” It is a supplanting of Christ’s lordship with one’s own—whether the attempt is conscious or unconscious. It denies the basic Christian teaching that we can be made new in Christ. I further say in the article:

Much of the sexuality debate revolves around human demands about what God allegedly must do if God is to be considered loving and just. . . . It is about whether or not we have the right to define for ourselves what we can do on the basis of desires that we experience in life, or whether God has the right to transform us into the image of Jesus as God sees fit.

I continue to stand by these statements. And I see nothing wrong with the tone. A decision on the part of the church to approve, or make exceptions for, homosexual behavior would have enormous negative ramifications for questions of biblical authority in the life of the church, for Christ’s lordship, for sexual standards and Christian ethics generally, for the unity of the church, and for the lives of many persons. Soft-pedaling what the united witness of Scripture strongly states on this matter does one’s neighbor harm, rather than good.

6. *Careful scholarship or hedging into meaninglessness?* Mr. Filiatreau “reports” that “Gagnon hedges many of his claims to such a degree that little meaning remains.” Ironically, Mr. Filiatreau criticizes me both for allegedly making “broad claims” (see 8. below) and for providing appropriate qualifiers. Go figure. What Mr. Filiatreau pejoratively labels as “hedging” is the mark of careful scholarship. As far as the comment about “little meaning” is concerned, Mr. Filiatreau has not read my article with care—presumably because his conclusions were already drawn before that effort.

a. *Reorientation and Alcoholics Anonymous.* One of my statements that Mr. Filiatreau contends is “hedged” to the point of being meaningless is the following:

Reparative therapists and transformation ministries report some success in achieving for motivated clients considerable to complete change from homosexual to heterosexual orientation—a rate of success comparable perhaps to that achieved by Alcoholics Anonymous.

Mr. Filiatreau’s charge of “little meaning” would be accurate only if I were arguing that therapy always turns exclusive homosexuals into exclusive heterosexuals. But I never assert that and I don’t believe that. However, *management* of homoerotic impulses, normally coincident with a reduction in intensity, is possible for all homosexual Christians (note the variegated meaning to “change” on p. 12a of my article). Does Mr. Filiatreau want to contend that Alcoholics Anonymous is a disaster because most participants in its programs do not undergo a complete or near-total eradication of desires for alcohol? My point was simply that this is one more piece of evidence, in a string of evidences that I cite on pp. 9-12, that homoerotic orientation, like alcoholism, cannot be equated with ethnicity, sex, and eye color as a non-malleable, completely congenital condition.

b. *Genetic influence?* Mr. Filiatreau cites the following statement from my article as another example of hedging-bordering-on-meaninglessness:

So while not discounting altogether genetic influence in the development of a homosexual identity, the studies to date suggest that the influence is not major.

I do not know why Mr. Filiatreau thinks that my position depends on showing that homosexual desire is a completely voluntary act. Even non-theologians know that there is no intrinsic link between biological causation and morality. A just-released article on the genetics of sexual orientation, written by two “essentialist” and pro-homosex scientists, Brian Mustanski and J. Michael Bailey, concedes:

Despite common assertions to the contrary, evidence for biological causation does not have clear moral, legal, or policy consequences. . . . No clear conclusions about the morality of a behaviour can be made from the mere fact of biological causation, because all behaviour is biologically caused. (*Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 18:4 [Nov. 2003], 432)

The fact that there is some genetic or biological influence on homosexuality does not reduce us to moral robots. We may not have asked to feel a given way, but we are responsible for what we do with such feelings. Christian faith does not operate on a model of biological determinism. It operates on the model of a new creation in Christ, in which sinful, biologically related urges are, and are to be, put to death.

The point of my quoted text is that microcultural and macrocultural incentives can manipulate, to some degree, the incidence of homosexuality in the population. Given the high incidence of attendant problems associated with homosexual behavior, why would we want to provide cultural incentives for the development of homosexuality? Moreover, for any given individual, hope remains for some level of change at some point in life, just as there is always hope for some level of change for the alcoholic, the pedophile, the

person addicted to pornography, and many others afflicted by an array of biologically related, but still malleable, sinful conditions.

A recent study by UCLA researchers that confirms gene differences in males and females has been touted as proving that homosexual identity is “hard-wired” and genetically inevitable. This conclusion is wrong on two counts (see, too, the nice critique by [Warren Throckmorton](#)). First, the researchers established only male-female differences, not homosexual-heterosexual differences. Second, genes are predisposing, not deterministic. As Mustanski and Bailey conclude: “The heritability of a trait provides little information about the extent to which it is compelled, immutable, innate, or most importantly, acceptable” (p. 435).

c. *Implicit proscription.* Mr. Filiatreau’s last example fares no better than the first two. I say: Same-sex intercourse is proscribed “by both Testaments” and “pervasively within each Testament, at least implicitly.” He emphasizes “implicitly” and suggests that the adverb renders meaningless any claim to canonical pervasiveness.

Why does Mr. Filiatreau think that this is a meaningless point? Man-mother incest and same-sex intercourse are mentioned a comparable number of times in the canon. Does Mr. Filiatreau want to argue that man-mother incest was a relatively minor issue for the authors of Scripture? Bestiality is mentioned explicitly even less—only four times in the Old Testament and not at all in the New Testament. Does this indicate that there is some ambivalence regarding bestiality on the part of New Testament authors? The point that needs to be grasped here is that some forms of behavior are regarded by consensus as so egregious, with the incidence of violation so rare, that extended discussion is unnecessary. (How many times in my lifetime have I heard a preacher speak against man-mother incest? Zero. Does that mean committing man-mother incest would be a matter of small import? Obviously not.) Such an issue is same-sex intercourse in Scripture.

Even so, biblical texts that explicitly reject same-sex intercourse are more numerous than Mr. Filiatreau is apparently aware of (*The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 56-110). Furthermore, texts that *implicitly* reject homosexual unions run the gamut of the entire Bible (*The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 185-228, 432-41). They include *not only* the creation stories in Genesis 1-3, Jesus’ appeal to Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24 as prescriptive norms (as well as a half dozen other indications of Jesus’ view), the Apostolic Decree in Acts and other *porneia* (“sexual immorality”) texts, and texts that reject overt attempts at blurring sexual differentiation (e.g., cross-dressing in Deuteronomy 22:5 or hairstyles in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16), *but also* the whole range of narratives, laws, proverbs, exhortations, metaphors, and poetry that presume the sole legitimacy of heterosexual unions. Nowhere is there the slightest indication of openness anywhere in the Bible to homoerotic attachments, including the narrative about David and Jonathan. The truth is that, so far as extant evidence indicates, every biblical author, as well as Jesus, would have been appalled by any same-sex intercourse occurring among the people of God. And we have not yet touched on the unequivocal witness of early Judaism (*The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 159-83).

7. *Unsupported “broad claims”?* Mr. Filiatreau claims: “The receptive audience apparently emboldened Gagnon to make a number of broad claims about homosexuality without presenting evidence in their support.” Here is his “proof.”

a. *A link between sexual experimentation and homosexuality.* Mr. Filiatreau’s first example is the following quote:

We should feel as much for children who, through vigorous societal endorsement of homosexual behavior, are encouraged at a crucial stage of sexual development into cultivating homosexual self-identification and behavior, with its disproportionately high risks to health, relational dynamics, and gender identity.

Mr. Filiatreau makes the same point again: “He draws direct correlations by assertion: ‘The greater the latitude for sexual experimentation, especially in the period from late childhood through adolescence and early adulthood, the greater the incidence of self-identifying homosexuals.’”

Mr. Filiatreau claims that I provide no support for these statements. Yet, once again, the documentation is clearly laid out on pp. 9-12. I urge Mr. Filiatreau to reread this section.

Another study that could have been cited is: G. Remafedi, et al., “Demography of sexual orientation in adolescents,” *Pediatrics* 89:4 (Apr. 1992): 714-21. Here is the authors’ abstract:

This study was undertaken to explore patterns of sexual orientation in a representative sample of Minnesota junior and senior high school students. The sample included 34,706 students (grades 7 through 12) from diverse ethnic, geographic, and socioeconomic strata. . . . Overall, 10.7% of students were “unsure” of their sexual orientation; 88.2% described themselves as predominantly heterosexual; and 1.1% described themselves as bisexual or predominantly homosexual. . . . Gender differences were minor; but responses to individual sexual orientation items varied with age, religiosity, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Uncertainty about sexual orientation diminished in successively older age groups, with corresponding increases in heterosexual and homosexual affiliation. The findings suggest an unfolding of sexual identity during adolescence, *influenced by sexual experience and demographic factors.* (emphasis added)

In other words, if adolescents experiment in homosexual behavior, those whose sexual identity is still somewhat in flux will probably experience a higher incidence of homosexual proclivity than if they had never participated in such behavior. We also know now that the brain rewires in accordance with experiences in life; in short, nurture can become nature (see *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, pp. 398-99).

b. *The promiscuous male homosexual life.* Mr. Filiatreau’s second example is: “He casually refers in passing to ‘the off-the-charts promiscuity of homosexual men, even in relation to homosexual women’” (pp. 8-9). I also make a passing comment to “non-

monogamous and short-term relationships” when describing briefly the high rate of problems attending homosexual relationships (p. 12).

I do not provide the documentation for this point in this article—again, it is only a 13-page article—but I do tell readers on p. 12 where in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* they can find ample documentation (pp. 452-60). I trust that there is no one restraining Mr. Filiatreau or other critics on the Task Force from reading my book.

I am not sure why Mr. Filiatreau thinks that the notion of disproportionately high rates of male homosexual promiscuity is a contestable point. There are basic male-female differences that create different types of problems for male and female homoerotic unions. A key problem for male homoerotic unions, attributable to the greater intensity and visual and genital focus of the male sexual drive, is the disproportionately high rate—grossly so—of sex partners. Of course, there are exceptions, but the rule remains.

That the point is not all that controversial, even among pro-homosex scientists, is evident from comments made by J. Michael Bailey in a recent book, *The Man Who Would Be Queen* (Joseph Henry Press, 2003). Bailey is chair of the department of Psychology at Northwestern University, author of a number of important identical twin studies, and a strong supporter of homosexual relationships. Bailey himself acknowledges:

Because of fundamental differences between men and women, the social organization of gay men’s sexuality will always look quite different from that of heterosexual men’s. Regardless of marital laws and policies, there will always be fewer gay men who are romantically attached. Gay men will always have many more sex partners than straight people do. Those who are attached will be less sexually monogamous. And although some gay male relationships will be for life, these will be many fewer than among heterosexual couples. . . . I suspect that *regardless of the progress of gay rights, gay men will continue to pursue happiness in ways that differ markedly from the ways that most straight people do. . . . Both heterosexual and homosexual people will need to be open minded about social practices common to people of other orientations.* (pp. 100-102; emphasis added)

Now, I do not argue that all male homosexuals will be unable to have lifelong, monogamous relationships (there will be exceptions), nor do I say that a non-monogamous proclivity is the main problem with homosexual practice (the structural incongruity of a same-sex merger per se is the main problem). But I do say that approval of homosexual unions will invariably erode, even further than has already happened, societal expectations of monogamy. Moreover, I note that if one validates homosexual unions based on an argument regarding biological determinism, then one is logically compelled to accept nonmonogamous male homosexual relationships—as Bailey himself concluded two years later. So I say in my article:

Ironically, those who argue that homosexual behavior should not be disavowed precisely because it is resistant to change would—to be consistent—have to contend that non-monogamous relationships be accepted for male homosexual relationships. For statistical evidence to date strongly suggests that male

homosexuals have extraordinary difficulty, relative even to lesbians, in forming monogamous unions.

c. *Commonsense standards for sexual complementarity.* Mr. Filiatreau refers disparagingly to my “undefined” reference to “commonsense standards for sexual complementarity, avoiding the twin extremes of too much similarity (as with incest) and too much dissimilarity (so bestiality).”

I am at a loss here. If it isn’t clear to everyone that a man-mother or brother sister or human-animal sexual union is *structurally* incongruous or incompatible, then we really do have a problem of great proportions.

8. *Obscure meaning?* Finally, Mr. Filiatreau alleges: “He makes claims so sweeping that their meaning is obscure: ‘The behavior arising from homosexual desire is associated with [a disproportionately high rate of health problems (sexually transmitted diseases, mental health issues) and of non-monogamous and short-term relationships, as well as with] an annihilation of basic societal gender norms’” (material in brackets was omitted by Mr. Filiatreau).

I am baffled as to why Mr. Filiatreau thinks the meaning of this sentence is obscure. An endorsement of homosexual behavior will lead to a disproportionately high rate of health and relational problems, as well as to an eventual elimination of basic societal gender norms. What could be more obvious than the latter? All the major homosexual advocacy groups embrace transvestism and transgenderism in their overall aims. The very denial of an essential male-female complementarity is a denial of the importance of sexual differentiation.

*Conclusion.*

How else can I say it? Mr. Filiatreau’s dismissive representation of the academic quality of my article is unsubstantiated, biased, and unprofessional—all the more since it comes under the guise of “news.”

Mr. Filiatreau has produced a knee-jerk editorial rather than unbiased reporting. He has violated the implicit journalistic contract with the reader by polemicizing rather than reporting. He has attacked a position that apparently he does not agree with—the position of the Presbyterian Church (USA) no less. The least that we can expect of reporters is fair and evenhanded judgment. One would hope that in the future the Presbyterian News Service would properly distinguish opinion from news. One would also think that Mr. Filiatreau, on more careful reflection, would offer an apology to me for the attack on my work.

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