

An Open Letter to the Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold

September 30, 2003

Dear Presiding Bishop Griswold,

The following remarks were attributed to you in an Associated Press interview published yesterday ([“Episcopal Leader Defends Gay Bishop,”](#) by Rachel Zoll, AP religion writer).

He said that in biblical times there was no understanding that homosexuality was a natural orientation and not a choice. “Discreet acts of homosexuality” were condemned in the Bible because they were acts of lust instead of the “love, forgiveness, grace” of committed same-sex relationships, he said. “Homosexuality, as we understand it as an orientation, is not mentioned in the Bible,” he said.

With all due respect, if these remarks are correctly cited, you are in error on all counts.

First, there were many theories in the Greco-Roman world that posited something akin to modern sexual orientation theory. Philosophers, doctors, and moralists often attributed one or more forms of homosexual behavior, at least in part, to congenital factors. And some of the same persons could still refer to such forms as “contrary to nature”—that is, given by nature but not in conformity with embodied existence or nature’s well-working processes. Lifelong, exclusive participants in homosexual behavior were also widely known in the ancient world. Indeed, Paul’s reference to the *malakoi* (“soft men,” men who play the sexual role of females) in 1 Corinthians 6:9 is one such instance.

Second, you assume that the absence of “choice” regarding sexual impulses absolves one of moral responsibility for the behavior arising from such impulses. Numerous sinful desires, sexual and otherwise, are not “chosen” in the sense of being manufactured willfully. That doesn’t make them any less sinful—though it can and should inform our pastoral response. Who would choose to be a pedophile if it were a simple matter of choice? Some people find it extraordinarily difficult to be limited to a single sex partner;

do they choose their sexual impulses? Some people grow up without an instinctive aversion to sex with close blood relations and then fall in love with one such relative; do they simply manufacture such feelings? Paul describes sin itself in Romans 7 as an innate impulse, passed on by an ancestor figure, running through the members of the human body, and never entirely within human control. The very nature of sin is that it generates biologically related impulses. Why do you think a biological connection disqualifies an impulse from being sinful? Such thinking is patently un-biblical.

Third, biblical writers were certainly not limiting their condemnation of same-sex intercourse to particularly exploitative forms. Non-exploitative forms were known in Paul's day and had Paul wanted to limit his condemnation to exploitative forms he certainly could have done so. The wording in Romans 1:24-27 is quite clear as regards what Paul found objectionable about same-sex intercourse: its same-sexness, persons seeking sexual integration with a non-complementary sexual same, persons erotically attracted to what they intrinsically are as sexual beings. This is sexual narcissism and/or sexual self-deception: a desire either for what one is or for what one wishes to be but in fact already is. The intertextual echoes to Genesis 1:27 ("God made them male and female") and Genesis 2:24 ("For this reason a man shall . . . be joined to his woman/wife and the two shall become one flesh") in Romans 1:24-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9, respectively, confirm that Paul had in view the male-female prerequisite ordained by God at creation. (Incidentally, so did Jesus when he appealed to the same two texts from Genesis as normative and prescriptive texts for human sexual relations [Mark 10:6-8].) The beautiful image put forward in Genesis 2:18-24 is that of an original binary human split down the side into two sexually differentiated beings. If sexual relations are to be had, "one-flesh" sexual wholeness requires a re-merger of the two constituent parts produced by the splitting. By "nature" in Romans 1:24-27 Paul meant the complementary structure of males and females still transparent in material creation—a category of thinking that transcends issues of love and commitment. The description in Romans 1:27 of males mutually gratifying themselves with other males does not suggest exploitation. Nor does the mention of female-female intercourse point us in the direction of a particularly exploitative form of same-sex intercourse. The language in Romans 1:24-27 of being "given over" to preexisting desires and forsaking any heterosexual relations certainly suggests innate and exclusive passions for members of the same sex. Scripture is clearly condemning every form of same-sex intercourse. Biblical authors would no more have accepted a committed and loving homosexual union than they would have accepted a committed and loving adult incestuous union. Both types of unions are structurally incompatible: sex with sexual or familial sames.

Much more could be said about each of the points above but what I have written should suffice for now.

Even some pro-homosex biblical scholars such as Bernadette Brooten and William Schoedel recognize that "sexual orientation" and commitment would have made little difference to Paul's indictment of same-sex intercourse. My book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Abingdon) which has been out for a full two years, also makes this clear (see especially pp. 347-60, 380-95). See also now my more condensed discussion in

Homosexuality and the Bible (Fortress), just released, and a forthcoming article in an edited volume entitled *Christian Sexuality* (Kirk House), which deals extensively with orientation theory in antiquity.

There really is no excuse any more for making the kinds of false statements about Scripture that you made in the AP interview. It is especially inexcusable for a presiding bishop—an office that has guarding the faith as a chief concern—to be making such inaccurate representations of the biblical witness. I urge you to read more widely, and more carefully, as regards recent work on the subject of the Bible and homosexual behavior.

Sincerely,

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