

# CHURCH POLICY AS REGARDS HOMOSEXUAL PRACTICE: MEMBERSHIP AND ORDAINED MINISTRY

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*[Note to readers: The following chapter was produced for my first book The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) back in 1999. Because the powers-that-be at Abingdon Press were predominantly supportive of homosexual unions, they did not want me to become “too practical.” They disagreed strongly with the policy decisions that I took in this chapter and so refused to publish it. I did nothing with the chapter because I was headed for a tenure decision and knew that my stances on these policy issues would further jeopardize my tenure—a tenure already (and ironically) jeopardized by publishing a book on the Bible’s view on homosexual practice that supported the official stance of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (with which my seminary was and is affiliated). After being awarded tenure in 2002 I more or less forgot about the chapter. However, a recent editorial in [Presbyweb.com](http://Presbyweb.com) by the moderator of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. labeling as “A Deeply Pernicious Heresy” (Aug. 4, 2007) any attempt at withholding membership from persons who repetitively and unrepentantly engage in homosexual practice has served as a catalyst for me to release this chapter. It’s long overdue. –Robert A. J. Gagnon, 8/8/07.]*

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Given the Bible's clear rejection of same-sex intercourse and the strong case that can be made for its enduring relevance in contemporary decision-making, what should Christians *do* with this information in formulating church policy? Should the church extend official membership to persons who are known to be homosexually active? Or if such persons are already members, should other members of the church disassociate from them or welcome them? Should the church ordain members who are known to be homosexually active? Should the church marry, or at least bless the union of, two persons of the same sex who are in, or want to be in, a sexual relationship? In short, the homosexuality debate affects church policy in three fundamental ways: (1) membership; (2) ordained ministry; and (3) blessing ceremonies or marriage.

The issue of marriage can be readily dismissed here: Obviously the church cannot bless a sexual bond constituted by what Scripture treats as severe sexual sin abhorred by God. To do so would effectively sanction the homosexual behavior, much as the blessing of a sexual union of three or more persons, or an adult incestuous bond, or even an adult-child sexual bond would effectively sanction the polyamory, incest, or pedophilia, respectively, that constitutes each of these unions. Nor is the argument convincing that asserts that it is better to bless and/or marry two persons of the same sex and promote fidelity than not to bless and/or marry such persons and encourage infidelity. For such an argument would lead us back down the road of faithful polyamorous (polygamous) marriages as an allegedly better alternative to promiscuous sexuality on the part of 'polysexual' persons.

Accordingly, only membership and ordained ministry will be discussed here. The treatment of church membership will be the longest section by far, because conclusions about ordained ministry follow from the discussion of membership.

## **I. Reflecting on the Personal Dimension of Church Policy**

Given an assessment of same-sex intercourse as sin, the church has to decide how to respond concretely to members (prospective and actual) engaged in such behavior. At one level the response should be the same as the response given to all members: love. It is true, as previously noted, that love does not prescribe a rigid, single set of concrete responses for all people at all times. A loving response to someone unjustly oppressed will usually vary in significant ways from a loving response to a person behaving irresponsibly. Nonetheless, love does consistently entail such qualities as patience, kindness, mercy, and gentleness (1 Cor 13:4; Gal 6:1). Love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:7).

One of the dangers that the church must be careful to avoid is overlooking the personal dimension of homosexual behavior. It is an obvious point, but one that can get lost in the shuffle, that the church is dealing with human beings made in God's image, not merely with abstract sin. The church has to respond not just to homosexual behavior but to homosexual persons. Thus the church is obligated to act out of the same care and concern for homosexually active persons that characterized God's redemptive work in the

world through Christ: humble, compassionate, and self-sacrificial service aimed at effecting the deliverance and transformation of others.

The stories told by persons with homoerotic urges who wish to engage in same-sex intercourse have been helpful in the following respect. They make clear to us the genuine pain that comes with sexual self-denial—not just a denial of certain sexual urges but, even more, a denial of one’s primary or exclusive sexual frame of reference. To be sure, christologically perceived, a struggle with homosexual urges can become an opportunity for experiencing the formation of the indwelling Christ, for dying with Christ and living a new life for God. Yet who would wish such pain on one’s own self? We are called to a cruciform existence but few of us go willingly. So when we hear such stories about the difficulty of denying an attraction to the same sex and about the pain of loneliness, self-loathing, and ostracism from others, we do well to remember our own most deep-seated struggles with sin, whether sexual or otherwise. Such stories ought to invoke in us compassion and sympathy. It is one thing to argue vigorously that same-sex intercourse is wrong. It is another thing entirely to stare into the face of someone who has never (or rarely) felt an erotic attraction for persons of the opposite sex and then to declare to that person that heterosexual marriage is the only viable option for acting on one’s sexual urges.

At the same time, there is another danger that the church faces besides the danger of overlooking the personal dimension of homosexual behavior. The danger exists of focusing one-sidedly on the very same personal dimension of homosexual behavior. The personal dimension is constricted when it is conceived only in terms of the feelings of persons who yearn for validation of their homosexual urges. And it is given inflated importance when conceived apart from God’s revealed will both in scripture and in nature, or apart from restraints on sexuality essential for producing a caring, healthy, and nurturing society, or apart from the effect of behavioral models on children and adults.

The stories of those who want to engage in homosexual behavior have an intentionally seductive quality. They are, to use ancient categories, testimonia with a single, “protreptic” aim; namely, to win converts to the view that homosexual behavior is normal and natural. These stories subtly inject the theme of individual moral autonomy: this is my world, these are my pains, these are my experiences. No one else can question what I feel. The hearer gets sucked into this story-world and, if not careful, may forget the larger world, the overarching moral universe, that makes a claim on us all. These testimonia, while discouraging hearers from passing moral judgment on homosexual behavior, encourage hearers to make clear identifications of victims (homosexual persons) and victimizers (those opposed to same-sex intercourse) based on who feels the most pain. Pain becomes a pass from moral scrutiny. Hearers are invited to adopt the fastest balm for alleviating such pain: acceptance of the behavior in question. Thus the focus is put on three elements: first, the individual rather than the community; second, the subjective realm of feelings rather than church doctrine or the objective effects of the behavior; and, third, the short-term, easy solution of gratifying desires rather than the long-term, difficult program of transforming thoughts and actions.

In hearing these stories—the sincerity of which are in many cases evident—we almost lose sight of what is at issue: for example, the right of one man to insert his penis in another man’s anus or mouth. We may be lulled into overlooking the fact that we are talking about an increased risk of disease, a decrease in morality, and a blatant disregard for the created order. Such stories are a only pale imitation of the stories of those who, out of a desire to obey God rather than gratify “the flesh,” have struggled against homosexual urges and renounced homosexual behavior. Yet the former can be very effective in destigmatizing homosexual behavior, especially for a laity that has become increasingly ill-informed about biblical theology, the church’s confessional heritage, and the negative consequences of same-sex intercourse. It is hard to overestimate the power of story. The church thus faces the difficult but necessary task of both showing compassion to persons beset by same-sex attractions and maintaining the justly deserved stigma associated with homosexual behavior.<sup>1</sup>

## II. Membership Issues and Matthew 18:15-20

The issue of membership for persons who yield to homosexual desires is complex. Membership requirements vary somewhat from denomination to denomination. Because this book is aimed at an ecumenical audience, the discussion must necessarily remain general. The question homosexuality poses for church membership is really twofold: Should persons who act on homosexual urges be allowed to become members? Should members whose homosexual activity becomes known be allowed to remain as members? In other words, membership requirements and requirements for church discipline (particularly, expulsion or excommunication) constitute two sides of the same coin. For denominations and independent local churches which practice only adult baptism, membership requirements will be the more important issue. For those that practice infant baptism, church discipline will factor more prominently.

Which persons with same-sex attractions might the question of denial/withdrawal of membership affect? The biblical texts that speak most directly and clearly to the issue of homosexuality (Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10) all put the stress on the *act* of same-sex intercourse. The issue is one of “lying with” (i.e., erotic intercourse with) people of the same sex. Rom 1:24-27 does address the matter of

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<sup>1</sup> In many denominations today even people who are unequivocally opposed to same-sex intercourse often feel obligated to compromise by allowing an endless round of testimonies from those who seek acceptance of their homosexual behavior. One wonders whether in doing so the church is shooting itself in the foot. The personal testimonies may have been helpful early on in the process of discerning God’s will but after decades of such stories they are becoming counterproductive to the church’s mission to affirm holy behavior. The church is saying, in effect, we believe homosexual behavior to be wrong but we also want to provide forums for people to continually erode our opposition to such behavior. If the church is going to commit itself to hearing the stories of practicing, self-affirming homosexual persons, it should do so only in carefully circumscribed contexts. When attempts to promote greater understanding for the plight of homosexual persons consistently degenerate into justifications for sinful homosexual behavior, it is probably time to discontinue such presentations. We do not allow adulterers, prostitutes, and pedophiles to share about their desires to subvert Christian morality; why should we do so in the case of self-affirming homosexual persons?

degrading sexual passions but the concern of the text is primarily with what people do with such passions. That means that mere possession of a homosexual inclination does not call into question a person's membership in the body of Christ. Are we saying then that what a person thinks and feels in his/her heart or says to another is a matter of indifference? No, not if we take seriously Jesus' teaching on anger and lust appearing in the first two antitheses of the Matthean Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:21-30). What one thinks, feels, and says can also get one thrown into hell (5:22, 29-30). But when we are talking about the denial or withdrawal of membership in the church, we are not referring to God's final judgment. Instead, at issue is the degree of latitude given to the church for policing the body of Christ in the interim time leading up to the Eschaton (End). God's final judgment takes into account a broad scope of sins, internal and external. The types of sins over which the church now has jurisdiction is more limited, for the obvious reason that humans have only an incomplete capacity to discern the inner thoughts, intentions, and desires of people. One can imagine cases in which sexually-aberrant behavior, shy of actual intercourse, may require the intervention and discipline of the church; for example, a man who makes unwelcome, lewd sexual comments to a woman, a man who arouses himself by looking at pedophilic literature, or a man who regularly cruises strip joints. There are gray areas and a range of disciplinary actions that can be taken short of excommunication. In general, though, for membership to be affected by sex a proscribed act of sexual intercourse is required (actual fornication, adultery, same-sex intercourse, etc.). In other words, in the case of homosexuality, only "practicing homosexuals" may be liable to excommunication.

Even the category of "practicing homosexuals" is too broad. Historically, whenever a person committed a sinful act meriting removal of membership, the church at its best has taken into account the degree to which the perpetrator expressed remorse, made amends, and resolved to struggle faithfully against temptation. In other words, the church is suppose to act in the hope of restoring the wrongdoer to obedience to Christ as Lord.

This principle is most clearly expressed in Matthew 18.<sup>2</sup> The section on church

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<sup>2</sup> The organization of these sayings into a single sayings block on community rules is the doing of the author of the Gospel (the fourth of his five blocks of Jesus sayings). The author brought together material from (a) Mark 9:33-37, 42-48 (= Matt 18:1-6, 8-9); (b) Q/Luke 17:1-3 (= Matt 18:6-7, 15a, 21-22) and 15:3-7 (= Matt 18:12-13); and (c) special Matthean material (Matt 18:23-35). Matthean editorial additions probably include vv. 4, 10,14. The source history of 18:15-20, the section on church discipline, is disputed. Some think the whole belongs to Matthew's special source (e.g., Hagner, *Matthew*, 530-31), others (e.g., Gundry, *Matthew*, 367-68) that it is Matthew's own expansion of Q/Luke 17:3 ("If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him"). Allison thinks that 18:15-17 derives from Matthew's Q version, 18:18 is Matthew's reuse of the special tradition in Matt 16:19, and only 18:19-20 derives directly from Matthew's special source (*Matthew*, 2.781, 783). A good case can be made for asserting that Matt 18:15-17 does not stem, at least in its present form, from the historical Jesus (note also the developed ecclesiology). Given the development of the synagogal "ban" in the formative Judaism of the post-70 period, Matthew himself (and/or his church) may have developed an institutional form of church discipline to both mirror and counter developments "across the street." Alternatively, Matt 18:15-20 could be a pre-70 embellishment of Q (some have suggested that the Matthean community is simply the Q community at a later stage of its development; cf. James Robinson, Ulrich Luz). Similar community rules already existed pre-70 at Qumran, and Paul himself recommended excommunication in the early 50s CE Yet, regardless of whether Matt 18:15-20 traces back to Jesus in any form, it remains authoritative for the church: (1) it is still part of scripture (as is the excommunication advocated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5); (2) Jesus' own

discipline (18:15-20) is sandwiched between two other sections that stress reintegration and forgiveness. The first section (18:1-14) emphasizes the importance of not causing offense to, or despising, other believers (“little ones”),<sup>3</sup> rigorously pursuing even those that go astray—for “it is not the will of your<sup>4</sup> Father who is in the heavens that one of these little ones be lost / perish” (18:14).<sup>5</sup> The church must go the extra mile in trying to restore the offending party.<sup>6</sup> The third section (18:21-35) stresses the importance of forgiveness. The saying about forgiving “seventy-seven times” (18:21-22)<sup>7</sup> asserts that no matter how times a person sins against another, the latter must forgive the former (presumably, upon the former’s repentance).<sup>8</sup> The implication is that the number of

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requirement of repentance (e.g., Q / Luke 10:13; 11:32) and rebuke (e.g., Q / Luke 17:3; cf. Lev 19:17) presupposes such a right for the church.; and (3) few today would argue that the church should be completely deprived of its right to excommunicate grossly disobedient members.

<sup>3</sup> The reference to believers as “little ones” should probably be related to the adjoining statement of Jesus that entry into the kingdom requires a child-like humility; that greatness is inversely related to the degree to which one asserts greatness over others.

<sup>4</sup> Or “my.” There is a text-critical problem here.

<sup>5</sup> The passive of the Greek word *apollumi* carries both senses, “be lost” (here the context is the parable of the lost sheep) and “perish.”

<sup>6</sup> Historically, the church has often missed the mark by an overzealousness to prosecute offenders (or at least that is the stereotype). In our own day we often see churches doing nothing—either refusing to judge the wrongdoer as spiritually “lost” (in a post-modern context, what is truth?) or fearful that vigorous pursuit of wayward members will come across as judgmental.

<sup>7</sup> Or, possibly, “seventy times seven” (Greek *hebdomēkontakis hepta*). Cf. the commentaries for discussion. The parallel with Gen 4:24 suggests “seventy-seven times.”

<sup>8</sup> It is not completely clear whether the forgiveness mentioned here presupposes or precedes repentance on the part of the offender (in favor of the former, Meier, Hagner, and Gundry; in favor of the latter, Allison). Most likely it is the former, as indicated by the ensuing parable of the unforgiving servant (cf. 18:29: “his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you’”) and the parallel saying in Luke 17:3 (“if he repents, forgive him”). To be sure, the “if he repents” in Luke 17:3 was probably introduced by Luke into the saying, since elsewhere he introduces the theme of repentance into a parallel Markan text (cf. Luke 5:32; the theme of repentance is also frequent in L and Acts). Nevertheless, Luke’s reading provides evidence for how this text might have been understood by a late-first-century Christian author (cf. *T. Gad* 6:3: “if anyone confesses and repents, forgive him”). Although the forgiveness spoken of in Matt 18:21-22 probably presupposes repentance on the part of the offender, both the motivation of gaining one’s brother in Matt 18:15 and the application of the parable of the lost sheep to wayward believers in 18:10-14 prove that the one doing the admonishing is not to do so out of personal malice towards the offender (cf. Lev 19:18-19; Sir 19:17; *T. Gad* 4:1-3; 6:1-5; 1QS 5:24-6:1; CD 9:2-8; James L. Kugel, “On Hidden Hatred and Open Reproach: Early Exegesis of Leviticus 19:17,” *HTR* 80 [1987] 43-62). Luke, while clearly including repentance as a precondition for “high-frequency” rates of forgiveness for the same offender (17:3-4) is elsewhere aware that forgiveness does not always require the repentance of the offending party. Certainly this is true of the Lukan Jesus’ words on the cross, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34; textually suspect, though), and of Stephen’s last words before martyrdom, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). In the Lord’s Prayer, the tying of forgiveness from God to the prior forgiveness of others says nothing about others needing to repent first. But since the prayer to “forgive us our debts, as we also forgave our debtors” is itself a penitent request for mercy, the comparison “as we also...” may hint that the forgiveness granted to others follows too upon such requests (i.e., it presupposes repentance on the part of one’s own “debtors”). Should we speak of two different levels of forgiveness: forgiveness as the removal of hate, grudges, and a desire for revenge (with repentance on the part of the offender not a prerequisite) and forgiveness as the swift and joyous acceptance of another’s apology? Or should the reader assume a distinction in the saying between venial (slight) and mortal sins (to use Thomist terminology)? However we answer these questions, Matthew 18 and other texts make clear that correction of another should not be done in a spirit of revenge and the requirement to forgive does not invalidate the church’s prerogative to discipline members.

times a person commits an offense cannot be used as a basis for excommunication, so long as the offender repents at each transgression.<sup>9</sup> The parable about the unforgiving servant suggests that failure to forgive another for sins committed against oneself could result in a retraction of divine forgiveness.<sup>10</sup> Neither the first nor third sections of

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Also problematic is how much weight should be given the phrase “against me” (*eis eme*). Does this limit the application of the saying to personal offenses against community members? For example, the saying may apply to a situation in which a believer insulted another believer (the latter would have to forgive the former with or without repentance) but not to a situation of immoral, consensual sexual activity (where forgiveness of the community would require repentance). The ambiguity is exacerbated by the fact that it is not clear that the discussion of church discipline in 18:15-20 mentions that the sin is “against you.” In 18:15, a number of important manuscripts read “If your brother sins against you” (*eis se*; generally “Western” [D, the Old Latin texts, the Syriac] or Byzantine [W, Θ, the bulk of minuscules] manuscripts, with a smattering of secondary Alexandrian texts [L, 33]; also, 078 [VI]). Although this reading has the widest geographical distribution, the oldest and best witnesses omit “against you” (including the Alexandrian witnesses Ⲛ, B, and the Sahidic Coptic). The internal evidence cuts both ways: scribes may have added the phrase to conform to the “against me” of 18:21; or scribes may have deleted the phrase either accidentally (similar-sounding endings) or intentionally (to widen the scope of the rule to all sin, not just sin committed against a particular community member). The absence of “against you” in the Lukan parallel (17:3) can be taken either as evidence for the originality of the omission in Matthew (its absence from Q) or as evidence for the originality of its inclusion (scribal assimilation). Nestle-Aland puts the *eis se* in brackets and, according to Metzger’s *Textual Commentary*, gives it a “C” rating. On the strength of the external evidence I think the omission of “against you” in 18:15 is the original reading (contra Gundry, Allison). Even so, 18:15 seems to presuppose an affront against a particular believer: first “go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.” Does that mean that the rules for church discipline in 18:15-20 are to be applied exclusively to sins committed against members of the community? This seems hardly possible. For example, it is not credible that an unmarried member of Matthew’s community could have repeatedly engaged in incest with family members who were not believers and at the same time have been exempted from these community rules of discipline. Probably both 18:15-20 and 18:21-22 were understood by the author as referring primarily to offenses committed against community members, without precluding a wider application.

The reference to forgiving “seventy-seven times” alludes to the unrestricted blood vengeance of Lamech’s time: “If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold” (Gen 4:24). As great as was Lamech’s thirst for revenge during the pre-Flood ascendancy of evil, so great must the Christian community’s thirst for forgiveness be. The Lukan parallel has: “And if he [your brother] sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him” (17:4). The much larger number of times that one is required to forgive in Matthew is probably secondary (Matthew likes to multiply allusions to the law and prophets, here Gen 4:24; the “not seven times” in Matthew’s version sounds like a response to the Lukan [Q] version; Luke shows no aversion to stressing forgiveness). But Luke’s version is also extraordinary since it speaks of forgiving seven times “a day.” Both versions stress that forgiveness must be limitless or nearly so, as long as the wrongdoer continues to repent. When real-world circumstances are considered, the saying sounds ludicrous and unreasonable. Most of us would be concerned about the genuineness of a repentance that, owing to repeated transgressions, is expressed over and over again. However, both Jesus and the communities that preserved the saying seemed more concerned about maintaining the virtue of forgiveness as an unmistakable hallmark of Christian piety.

<sup>9</sup> I am not so sure how literally Matthew or Luke would have taken this in actual practice. Of course, the numbers “seven times a day” (Luke) or “seventy-seven times” (Matthew) are hyperbole, but hyperbole for an extraordinarily high number of mandatory acts of forgiveness. If a man committed adultery against his wife once per day for two months, or seven times each day *ad infinitum*, but “repented” after each occasion, could he have escaped excommunication? It seems unlikely. The saying does suggest, though, that even slight evidence of an ongoing struggle with a specific sinful conduct should be sufficient to refrain from church discipline.

<sup>10</sup> The importance of this point is confirmed by the fact that in Matthew the Lord’s Prayer is followed by commentary on only one petition, the petition for forgiveness. The commentary makes clear that the

Matthew 18 nullifies the second section on church discipline and excommunication. However, they do carefully circumscribe it to limit a trigger-happy, heavy-handed, and callous application of such discipline. Church discipline ought not to arise out of revenge for wrong done to one's own person. Nor should the church in making a decision to excommunicate think that it is consigning the offender to perdition. The intent, and hope, is always the ultimate restoration of the offender.

The section on discipline (18:15-20) itself bends toward mercy.<sup>11</sup> Expulsion from the church, in which the offender takes on the status of an outsider ("like a Gentile and tax collector," 18:17), is a last resort, the fourth and final step of an ongoing attempt at restoration.<sup>12</sup> Even when this fourth step is taken, the church is still obligated to pursue the wrongdoer like a shepherd pursuing a sheep gone astray (18:12-14; through prayer?). The first step comes when the one who notices the fault in a fellow believer tries to

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request to God to forgive us only "as we also have forgiven our debtors" (6:12) means what it says: "For if you forgive people their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive people, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (6:14-15).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the requirements expressed in two Qumran texts, the *Rule of the Community* and the *Damascus Document*. Both texts are reliant on Lev 19:17-18, as Matt 18:15-20 also appears to be (cf. Matthew's substitute of Q / Luke's *epitimēson* with *elegxon* in 18:15, picking up the verb perhaps from LXX Lev 19:17). "Each should reproach his fellow in truth, in meekness and in compassionate love for the man. No-one should speak to his brother in anger or muttering,...and he should not detest him..., but instead reproach him that day so as not to incur a sin for his fault. And in addition, no-one should raise a matter against his fellow in front of the Many *unless it is with reproof in the presence of witnesses*" (1QS 5:24-6:1); "And what it says: [Lev 19:18] 'Do not avenge yourself or bear resentment against the sons of your people': everyone of those who entered the covenant who brings an accusation against his fellow, *unless it is with reproach before witnesses*, or who brings it when he is angry, or he tells it to his elders so that they despise him, he is 'the one who avenges himself and bears resentment'.... If he kept silent about him from one day to the other,...he has witnessed against himself, for he did not fulfill the commandment of God which tells him: [Lev 19:17] 'You shall reproach your fellow so as not to incur sin because of him'....*Any matter in which a man sins against the law, and his fellow sees him and he is alone; if it is a capital matter, he shall denounce him in his presence, with reproach, to the Inspector, and the Inspector shall write with his hand until he commits it again in the presence of someone alone*, his judgment is complete; *but if they are two, one and one, who testify about a different matter, the man is only to be excluded from the pure food* on condition that they are trustworthy, and that on the same day on which he saw him, he denounces him to the Inspector" (CD 9.2-8, 16-22; translations by Florentino Martínez; my emphases). Both texts stress that witnesses to a sinful act by a member must reproach the member or incur sin themselves. At the same time, there are safeguards against abuse. Both texts emphasize the importance of not reproaching a fellow member in anger, of reproaching on the day of the offense or not at all, and of requiring more than one witness to the same offense. CD 9:16-22 allows single witnesses only in capital offenses, and even then only when the offender commits the sin twice before single witnesses. If two single witnesses come forward, but each testify to a different violation of the law by the same offender, the offender can only be excluded from the "pure food," not expelled. Some offenses led to separation from the "pure meal" or reductions of the food ration; others to expulsion from the community (including uttering the name of God, slandering the community or complaining about the leadership, sharing food or property with someone excommunicated, or any deliberate violations of the law of Moses; 1QS 7:16-25; 8:21-23). For a discussion of discipline at Qumran, cf. Göran Forkman, *The Limits of the Religious Community: Expulsion from the Religious Community within the Qumran Sect, within Rabbinic Judaism, and within Primitive Christianity* (ConBNT 5; Lund: Gleerup, 1972) 39-86, 127-28.

<sup>12</sup> Since Jesus associated with tax collectors, this is a problematic label for people with whom one ought not to associate. In context, the sense appears to be: treat such a one as other Jews normally treat pagans and tax collectors; keep away from them. The word *hōsper* ("as") indicates that the person is not actually an outcast from the church but should be treated as one.



convince him of his culpability in private. The hope one carries to such a confrontation is that of “regaining your brother” (18:15). Only “if he does not listen” does one proceed to the second step: taking along one or two other members of the church (18:16). This step has two functions: it gives the alleged wrongdoer a second chance to repent and, if such repentance is not forthcoming, provides clear confirmation by additional witnesses of the wrongdoer’s recalcitrance (giving the recalcitrance official status). As with Deut 19:15 (a criminal conviction requires at least two or three witnesses), the provision of additional witnesses is a safeguard against false accusations.<sup>13</sup> It has the alleged wrongdoer’s right to a fair hearing in view. Once again, only “if he refuses to listen to them” (the witnesses) is the matter taken to the next (i.e., third) step: “tell it to the church” (18:17). And only “if he refuses to listen *even* to the church”<sup>14</sup> is the fourth step, expulsion, taken. In effect, we have a “three-strikes” rule. The following statements about binding and loosing with heaven’s authority and Jesus’ own presence in the midst of the final judicial proceeding (18:18-20) are intended as confirmations to the church and wrongdoer alike that the church’s action is sanctioned by Christ and God. But what is sealed is not the wrongdoer’s eternal damnation but rather exclusion from the communal meetings and meals of believers, where the presence of Christ is most keenly felt, until repentance takes place. All of these actions fall under the rubric of love, not hate or revenge, as Lev 19:17-18 makes clear: “You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall firmly reprove your fellow-countryman.... You shall not take revenge and you shall not hold a grudge...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Unlike Deut 19:15, the witnesses in Matt 18:16 appear to function not as witnesses to the original offense but rather as witnesses to the offender’s refusal to heed rebuke.

<sup>14</sup> The “even” (*kai*) stresses the obstinacy and impenitence of the wrongdoer. “Presumably, ... the type of sin being considered is of a substantial rather than trivial or merely personal nature” (Hagner, *Matthew*, 531).

<sup>15</sup> A similar point about the loving intent of disassociation is scored by 2 Thess 3:6, 14-15: “We command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor 5:4) to keep yourselves away from (hold yourselves aloof from, shun; *stellesthai*) every brother who is conducting himself in a disorderly (undisciplined, unruly, irresponsible) manner (or: idly, in idleness; *ataktēs*) and not in accordance with the tradition which they (or: you; a textually-disputed reading) received from us.... If anyone does not obey our word transmitted by this letter, take note of (or: signify in writing, note down; *sēmeiousthe*; cf. CD 9:18) this person to discontinue associating (*mē sunanamignusthai*, cf. 1 Cor 5:9, 11) with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. And do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish/warn him as a brother.” The reference is to believers who mooch off the community rather than work for a living, in imitation of Cynic preachers and/or in expectation of an imminent parousia. Even though the church breaks off fellowship with the offender, the church is to continue regarding the offender as a severely admonished family member, not an enemy. There is tension (though not necessarily outright contradiction) between this assertion and the declaration in Matt 18:17 that the expelled member “should be to you like the Gentile and the tax collector” (the latter is probably to be understood as an oath-formula issued by the church at the time of excommunication). Given this tension and the fact that ongoing admonition may be presumed, some commentators have suggested that the discipline spoken of in 2 Thess 3:6, 14-15 involved something less than an outright excommunication, possibly only exclusion from community meals (cf. Gal 2:12: *hupostellen*) or table fellowship with individual believers (cf. Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* [BNTC; London: Black, 1972] 333-34, 343-45; F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* [WBC 45; Waco: Word, 1982] 210-11; Forkman, *Limits of the Religious Community*, 135; for the view that 2 Thess 3:6, 14-15 refers to full-blown excommunication, cf. Charles A. Wanamaker, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990] 289-90).

Other texts that speak of excommunication or disassociation appear in the Pastoral Epistles. In 1 Tim 1:20 the author (whether Paul or someone writing in Paul’s name) states that he has “handed over to Satan”

The principles enshrined in Matthew 18 flow naturally from the portrayal of Jesus throughout this Gospel. On the one hand, Jesus constantly emphasizes the necessity of

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Hymenaeus and Alexander—presumably the former for “claiming that the resurrection has already taken place” (2 Tim 2:18) and the latter for doing Paul “great harm” (2 Tim 4:14)—“in order that they might learn through discipline (*paideuthōsin*) not to say harmful things (or: blaspheme; *blasphēmein*).” 2 Tim 3:5 speaks of avoiding those who practice a range of sinful behaviors (3:1-4, including “those who make their way into households and captivate silly women,” 3:6). Titus 3:9-11 reads: “But avoid foolish speculations (or controversies, investigations; *zētēseis*) and genealogies and quarrels and battles about the law, for they are unprofitable and futile. Refuse (or reject; perhaps: dismiss, drive out; avoid, have nothing to do with, break off contact with; *paraitou*) a factious person (or divisive person; perhaps, heretical person; *hairetikon anthrōpon*) after one and (then) a second admonition/warning, knowing that such a person is perverted (or warped; lit., has been turned inside out, *exestaptai*) and keeps on sinning, as he brings on his own condemnation.” A comparison of pertinent texts in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim 1:3-11; 3:9-11; 4:3, 7; 6:20-21; 2 Tim 2:14-18, 23; 4:3-4; Tit 1:10-16) demonstrates that divisiveness over the interpretation of the law has to do with esoteric, mystical speculation (meaningless speculations about myths and genealogies [“gnosis”]), false doctrine (denial of the resurrection), and prohibitions based on an anti-body dualism (forbidding certain foods and marriage), not the right of the church to apply strictures against immoral behavior. The author affirms in 1 Tim 1:8-11 that the law is “legitimately” used when it is employed against “murderers, fornicators, men who lie with males, kidnappers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is opposed to sound teaching.”

There are significant differences between Titus 3:9-11 and Matt 18:15-20. Titus 3:9-11 recommends two admonitions of a person espousing heretical doctrine or behaving immorally (cf. the three in Matt 18:15-20). Here the admonitions are given not first by the one offended, then by other Christian “witnesses,” and finally the church as in Matt 18:15-20. Rather, both admonitions are given by Titus, who has been invested by Paul with the power to appoint elders or bishops in every town of Crete (1:5-7; i.e., the admonitions are given by the regional church leader who has the power to appoint overseers in various local churches; cf. 1 Tim 1:20). The intervention of a single authoritative leader can be attributed to the particular circumstances (a heretical movement by multiple teachers) and/or to the tendency of the Pastoral Epistles to place greater emphasis on the authority of a church hierarchy (the so-called institutionalization of the church). Also different from Matt 18:15-20 (and 2 Thess 3:6, 14-15; 1 Cor 5:5) is the perception of the fate of the offender. Little hope is held out for the offender’s repentance. Any misgivings that Titus might have of disassociating himself are to be assuaged by the thought that these factious persons have already been perverted to a point that self-destruction may be inevitable. Perhaps, though, the assumption that the author has given up hope is a misreading. 1 Tim 1:20 seems to hold out some hope that Hymenaeus and Alexander may yet learn through discipline the error of their ways (before final torment?). Jerome Quinn argues that, unlike Matt 18:15-20, in Tit 3:9-11 only “the leader is to break off official relationships with the ‘divisive man,’” that “the members of the church are not so instructed” (*The Letter to Titus* [AB 35; New York: Doubleday, 1990] 251). However, this conclusion makes too much of an argument from silence. Presumably, if the leader of the churches in Crete has broken off all contact with a factious person, the latter cannot be a member of a church over which the leader has jurisdiction.

For other texts that have implications for disassociation or severe discipline, cf. Rom 16:17; 1 Cor 4:14, 21; 2 Cor 12:20-13:4, 10; Acts 5:1-11; 8:18-24; John 10-11; 3 John 10; Rev 2:2, 14-16, 20; anathemas in 1 Cor 16:22; Gal 1:8-9; Rev 22:18-19. 1 John 5:16-17 speaks of a “mortal sin” or “sin unto death,” probably referring to the secessionist refusal to “believe in Jesus as the Christ come in the flesh and as the Son of God” (Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John* [AB; New York: Doubleday, 1982] 618). In 2 Cor 2:5-11; 7:11, the nature of the community “punishment” against the Corinthian believer who offended Paul cannot be determined precisely. Some commentators have identified the offender here with the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5 (in my view unlikely). For church discipline in Paul, cf. Forkman, *The Limits of the Religious Community*, 115-217 (for the NT generally), Thomas E. Schmidt, “Discipline,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 214-18; Calvin J. Roetzel, *Judgment in the Community: A Study of the Relationship Between Eschatology and Ecclesiology in Paul* (Leiden: Brill, 1972) esp. 112-36 (Roetzel argues that both 2 Thess 3:6, 14-15 and 2 Cor 2:5-11 refer to temporary exclusions from the community while 1 Corinthians 5 refers to a permanent exclusion, 120-24, 132-34; cf. the discussion of 1 Cor 5:5, below).

“doing the will of my Father in heaven” and of living in righteousness. The six antitheses in 5:21-48 and the prologue to them (5:17-20) epitomize the demand for a higher obedience to the law and the prophets. Two of these demands have to do with sexual ethics (the sayings about adultery and divorce, 5:27-30, 31-32). At the same time Jesus prioritizes certain core values such as love, mercy, and forgiveness and inveighs against judging, hypocrisy, and the imposition of unreasonable burdens. The parables of the weeds sown among the wheat (13:24-30, 36-43) and of the fishnet (13:47-50), both of them appearing only in Matthew’s Gospel, as well as the Matthean addition to the parable of the great supper (the wrongly-attired wedding guests, 22:11-14), underscore the limitations of church discipline in the present age. In maintaining the right to excommunicate believers for gross wrongdoing and impenitence, the church recognizes that it is never going to “weed out” from its ranks all the false believers. If it becomes too overzealous in its discipline of wayward members it will do more harm than good and in the end pull out the wheat with the weeds.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, if there is any case for withdrawing church membership from people who engage in same-sex intercourse, it can only be in instances where the participants are unrepentant in the face of earnest attempts on the part of the church to dissuade them from sinful behavior. Excommunication does not even come up for homosexual persons who are making a sincere effort to struggle against same-sex passions. To be at all eligible for excommunication, Christians with a homosexual proclivity would need to be not only “practicing” but also (as the phrase goes) “self-affirming.”

To be sure, some question the usefulness of the term “self-affirming.” If people are sincere in their conclusion that they experience persistent and intense homosexual desire, what option in terms of well-being and faithfulness to their Creator do they have if they, much less the church, cannot “affirm” who they are? The problem with such thinking is that, carried to its logical conclusion, it holds the most essential moral standards and beliefs of the church captive to the sincere intentions of whoever transgresses them. If the church followed this line of reasoning, such “significant” sins as incest, adultery, fornication, bestiality, prostitution, idolatry, blatant racism, wife-beating, perjury, and embezzlement could not incur the censure of the church if the offenders were “self-affirming.” Some Gnostics of the second to fourth centuries CE sincerely believed that they were being obedient to the gospel when they declared the god who created this world and instituted the Mosaic law to be evil. Mormons in the nineteenth century sincerely believed that the practice of polygamy was divinely ordained by the God of Jesus Christ. In our own day a churchgoing member of NAMBLA (the North American Man-Boy Love Association) would probably think he is acting honorably in advocating a

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<sup>16</sup> One can only surmise what *unrepentant* behavior for Matthew would have constituted grounds for exclusion from the community. Among the possible offenses might be: causing another member to fall from the faith (18:6-7); malicious behavior toward a fellow member or even one’s enemies, adultery (however broadly defined, including divorce/remarriage on grounds other than sexual immorality), and perjury (possibly any deliberate lying; 5:21-48); failure to forgive a member or divisive behavior (6:14-15; 7:1-5; 18:21-35); “serving mammon/wealth” (6:19-34; 19:16-26); behaving as a false prophet (7:15-23; 24:11, 24); refusal to show hospitality toward visiting Christian missionaries (10:11-15, 40-42; 25:31-46); renouncing one’s faith before authorities (10:17-33) or betraying a member to authorities (24:10); blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (12:31-32); and gross hypocritical religiosity (6:1-18; chap. 23).

right to have sexual intercourse with boys. In all these cases, a sincere belief in the rightness of one's actions is irrelevant to the church's deliberations. The same is true of those who engage in same-sex intercourse, however much the participants may be convinced that such conduct is blessed by God. Membership in the church is not a right. The church has a right to (a) define on the basis of scripture minimal standards of belief and conduct and (b) expel or refuse membership to any who cannot subscribe to such standards. Otherwise, the church has no hope of sustaining even a semblance of fidelity to the truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup>

### III. Membership Issues and 1 Corinthians 5

The question that faces the church, then, is: should practicing (i.e., having same-sex intercourse), self-affirming (i.e., persistently unrepentant) homosexual persons—hereafter “*p/sa*” *homosexual persons* for shorthand—be withheld membership in the church or, if already members, excommunicated? Does same-sex intercourse rise to the level of a “high offense”? The answer depends in part on what other kinds of “high offenses” same-sex intercourse is compared with. Is same-sex intercourse a relatively minor or major sin? Certainly the texts from Leviticus (18:22; 20:13) and Paul (Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 6:9; cf. 1 Tim 1:10) indicate that same-sex intercourse (particularly between males) is to be treated as a major sin. The sexual sins with which it is linked are adultery; fornication, prostitution, and incest (*porneia*);<sup>18</sup> and bestiality. Indeed, a case could be made that, in the view of the framers of the Levitical Holiness Code and in Paul's view, same-sex intercourse surpasses adultery and fornication in terms of the degree of abhorrence it generates. Unlike heterosexual intercourse, same-sex intercourse is not wrong only when it manifests itself in sexual activity outside the bounds of a lifelong, monogamous relationship—although it usually does manifest itself in such ways as well. It is also wrong for another crucial reason, that is, as a blatant rebellion against the categories of human maleness and femaleness that God declared to be part of the “very good” creation. Thus, in Leviticus 18 the author(s) made a special point of labeling intercourse between males as “an abomination,” “something utterly detestable to God.” Paul treated it as *the* classic example in human interrelations of a wicked suppression of the truth about God available in nature. In his understanding, same-sex intercourse was deserving (along with idolatry) of being moved ahead of other vices as prime evidence for the fact that humans were “without excuse.” And they were “without excuse” precisely because they knew—or ought to have known—“that those engaging in such activities are worthy of death.”<sup>19</sup> Regardless of the relative ranking of major sexual sins,

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<sup>17</sup> Admittedly, the phrase “self-affirming” is not as precise as one could wish because the concept of “self” is broader than the homosexual behavior in question. There is nothing wrong with a homosexual person affirming other parts of his/her identity that are good in God's eyes and that have nothing to do with same-sex passions and behavior. The problem is that of finding an adjective to replace “self-affirming.” What people mean by a “self-affirming homosexual person” is a “homosexual-behavior-affirming homosexual person,” that is, a homosexual person who affirms the homosexual behavior that s/he is engaged in. Lacking a better shorthand adjective, we are for better or worse stuck with “self-affirming.” Perhaps “unrepentant” would be a good substitute?

<sup>18</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 5:1, 9-11; 6:9, 13-18.

<sup>19</sup> This does not necessarily mean that, in Paul's mind, same-sex intercourse was in all respects the worst

all of them, if persistent and not repented of, constitute grounds for exclusion from the kingdom of God—at least in a biblical view of things. Is the church then justified in excommunicating self-affirming and unrepentant participants in major *sexual* sins, including same-sex intercourse?

Certainly Paul thought so, as is evident from the way in which he dealt with a case of incest in 1 Corinthians 5. The text is especially relevant for the question of same-sex intercourse and church membership because the vice lists in 5:10-11 that dictate the kinds of believers with whom the church must disassociate itself match up perfectly with the vice list in 6:9-10, where those who engage in same-sex intercourse are mentioned alongside other types of people who will not inherit the kingdom of God (see below). *The inference is clear and inescapable: in Paul's view, among the types of Christians with whom the church should break off all contact were "so-called brothers" or "brothers in name" who habitually engaged in same-sex intercourse (malakoi and arsenokoitai)—"not even to eat with such a person" (5:11).*<sup>20</sup> The believers whom Paul targeted for excommunication and disassociation in 5:10-11 were so targeted because, apart from repentance, they belonged to a list of types of sinners who would be excluded from God's coming kingdom—*regardless of their profession of faith* (6:9-10). The church has the God-given mandate to reverse the normal approach of "welcoming" all who believe, both weak and strong, into the household of God because Christians engaged in such habitual patterns of sinful behavior were in danger of cutting themselves off from the redemptive work of God in Christ (cf. Rom 14:1, 3, 17; 15:7). Unlike issues of diet and calendar, these offenses were not *adiaphora*, "matters of indifference" with respect to salvation in Christ. The offenses were so serious and the danger so great that nothing short of expulsion was called for, as a vigorous wake-up call for the offenders and as a safeguard for the holiness of the church and its individual members. Biblically speaking, the only grounds the church *ever* has for disrupting the fellowship of believers

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sin humans could commit in their interrelationships with other human beings, for example, greater than murder. Rather, in Paul's understanding, same-sex intercourse may well have been at the top of the list in terms of perversity, that is, in terms of the obviousness of its detestable quality to God and the degree of sinful obstinacy required to embrace "the lie" over visible truth in nature. There are instances where killing may be justified (e.g., as the appropriate civil penalty for certain crimes), but same-sex intercourse is never justified.

<sup>20</sup> All four vices in 5:10 are picked up in 5:11, to which two more are added. The types of believing sinners mentioned in these lists are to be excommunicated from the church and all association with them ends until and only until repentance takes place. All six vices in 5:11 are in turn picked up in 6:9-10, to which four more are added. Those who practice the vices listed in 6:9-10 "will not inherit the kingdom of God." The four additional vices in 6:9-10 are of the same types as those listed in 5:10-11. 6:9-10 adds adulterers and both active and passive participants in same-sex intercourse to the general term *pornoi* in 5:10-11 ("the sexually immoral," including fornicators and those who engage in incest and prostitution); and it adds "thieves" to the mention of "the greedy" and "robbers/swindlers" in 5:10-11. It is inconceivable that adulterers and those engaged in same-sex intercourse would, in Paul's mind, be exempt from excommunication while fornicators and people who committed incest were subject to it; just as it is inconceivable that thieves would be spared excommunication but "robbers/swindlers" and the "greedy" would not. Therefore, the only conclusion one can reasonably reach is that Paul prescribed excommunication and disassociation (5:10-11) for unrepentant Christians who engaged in behavior that would lead to the exclusion from God's kingdom (6:9-10). In Paul's view, all Christians who engaged in patterns of behavior that ultimately led to disinheritance from God's kingdom were *by definition* people to be shunned by the church—including people who engaged in same-sex intercourse.

and reconfiguring the visible church is when one or more Christians hold beliefs or exhibit behaviors which, if continued and not repented of, would lead to a retraction of God's welcome.<sup>21</sup>

What is so remarkable about 1 Corinthians 5 is that the one so adamantly insisting on excommunication of a Corinthian believer was none other than the "apostle of grace," a man who arguably suffered as much for his converts as any minister in the history of the church. Few would accuse Paul of having a deficient understanding of God's grace (legalism), an uncaring attitude toward the members of his churches, or a naive view about the power of sin operating in the human body. Clearly Paul knew that his converts to Christian faith were still fragile human beings who were far from perfection and in need of love, encouragement, and gentle admonition. Thus he could say to the Thessalonian church: "We exhort you, brothers, to admonish/warn the disorderly (or unruly, idle; *ataktous*), to speak soothingly to the fainthearted (or discouraged; *oligopsuchous*), provide close support for the weak, be patient with all" (1 Thess 5:14). Here the responses to believers experiencing difficulty in their walk with Christ are tailored to specific needs. Those who are unruly require warnings and serious admonitions, those who are discouraged or weak need gentler treatment. In the context of a sharp rebuttal of the Galatian church and meddling Jewish-Christian "Judaizers," Paul could still say: "Brethren, if in fact a person is taken unawares by any trespass, you the spiritual ones, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, being on the lookout lest you too be tempted" (Gal 6:1). Again, different circumstances merit different responses. Paul himself demanded that the "strong" in Corinth and in Rome not coerce the "weak" into eating idol meat, even though his own view of idol meat was closer to the "strong" than to the "weak."

Apparently, Paul did not subscribe to the view that, since all Christians still sin, no particular sinners should be singled out for excommunication. It was obvious to him that the Corinthian church had a lot of problems. In 1 Corinthians alone, one reads of Corinthian believers spawning divisions over preferred Christian leaders (chaps. 1-4),

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<sup>21</sup> This is the point of Rom 14:1-15:13. The reason why Paul could not permit the Roman "strong" (who ate meat and viewed all days as equally sacred to God) to look down on the "weak" (who refused all meat and treated some days as particularly holy), or permit the "weak" to judge the "strong," is because issues of food and calendar were matters of indifference with respect to inheriting the coming kingdom of God (14:17). One could be saved on that Day regardless of whether one ate meat or treated the Sabbath as particularly holy. Consequently, those whom God had already "welcomed," believers could not "unwelcome," or act in an unwelcoming manner toward. Paul was not saying, however, that all beliefs and all forms of behavior were matters of indifference with respect to entering God's kingdom. This is evident from a comparison of 14:17 ("the kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink but it is a matter of *righteousness* and peace and joy in the *Holy Spirit*") with Paul's remarks just prior to the discussion in 14:1-15:13. In 13:11-14 Paul ominously referred to unrestrained wildness in partying and drunkenness, sexual debauchery and licentiousness, quarreling and jealousy, as "works of darkness" which must be cast off, and all the more so as the day of God's coming kingdom drew near. The implication is clear that those who failed to replace the works of darkness with "the armor of light" and who oriented their lives toward gratifying the desires of the flesh would face destruction with the world. Cf. 1 Thess 5:1-11, which states clearly that those who so live in darkness will face "sudden destruction" at the coming of the Lord, while believers who put on God's armor will escape the destruction. In Rom 11:22 Paul warned the Roman gentile believers that they would continue to be recipients of God's "kindness" rather than God's "severity" "if you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too [like unbelieving Israel] will be cut off."

suings other believers in pagan courts (6:1-11), eating idol meat in idol temples and exhorting “weak” believers to eat idol meat against their own consciences (chaps. 8-10), stuffing their guts at the celebration of the Lord’s Supper while other believers go hungry (11:17-34), giving excess attention to possession of revelatory knowledge and tongues-speaking (without interpretation) and not enough attention to loving all the “members” of the body (chaps. 12-14), and denying the bodily resurrection of the dead (chap. 15). In several of these matters he warns the community of God’s direct judgment (3:12-17; 6:9-11; 10:1-22; 11:27-34). Yet it is interesting that only in the case of an instance of gross sexual immorality (incest) does Paul demand that the community expel the believer from their midst (1 Cor 5:2-5).<sup>22</sup>

Why then in a letter loaded with admonition did Paul single out this infraction of God’s will as meriting expulsion? At least four answers can be given.

First, Paul considered this to be a particularly disgusting and blatant example of public misconduct (here “sexual immorality of a kind that does not exist even among pagans,” 5:1).<sup>23</sup> It was an extreme offense. The fact that the Corinthians bragged about it

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<sup>22</sup> Possibly if the “some” among the Corinthians who denied the resurrection of the dead (15:12) had not “sobered up” and come to their senses (15:34a), Paul would have recommended their expulsion as well: “stop sinning, for some have an ignorance of God; I say this to your shame” (15:34b). He certainly regarded their view as having serious ramifications for belief in Christ’s resurrection which, in turn, was part of the core gospel necessary for salvation (15:1-8, 13-19; cf. 1 Tim 1:20; 2 Tim 2:17).

<sup>23</sup> The phrase “woman/wife of [his] father” (5:1) is based on Lev 18:8; 20:11; Deut 22:30; 27:20 (LXX), which prohibits intercourse between a man and his stepmother. For condemnation of step-mother marriages in early Judaism and in at least some Roman legal documents and high society, cf. Deming, “The Unity of 1 Corinthians 5-6,” 294-95; Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 96; Brian S. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5-7* (AGAJU 22; Leiden: Brill, 1994) 83. Paul’s statement in 5:1 that this was an instance of sexual immorality “of a sort which does not even exist among the gentiles” may be intentional hyperbole. Deming notes that “in both Greek and Roman authors the infamy of a son-stepmother relationship became the stuff of literature” (ibid., 295; citing Patricia A. Watson, *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny and Reality* [Leiden: Brill, 1995]). Surely, then, behavior of this sort existed in gentile culture.

On another matter, Countryman contends that the use of the verb “has” indicates that Paul treats this primarily as a property matter. “The violation of the majesty of a father was a kind of theft, depriving another of legitimate property” (*Dirt, Greed, and Sex*, 199). Paul was “committed to keeping the son in subordination to the father” (ibid., 200). “We do not know, to be sure, whether the man’s father was still alive.... Even if the father were dead, however, the subordination of the individual to the family in ancient society meant that such a union, by setting the son on a par with his father, constituted an act of disrespect for the family” (ibid., 198). Countryman is correct that there is an issue of ownership here, but he exaggerates it and misreads its function. The language of ownership provides protection for women in in-law relationships against the abusive intrusion of the male sexual appetite into the family circle. The man cannot excuse his actions by claiming an absence of blood ties because the covenant of marriage, like all covenants, creates a kinship bond *de jure*. Although Paul was not entirely free of a patriarchal streak in such matters (cf. 1 Thess 4:4-6), the language of ownership did not carry the same demeaning tone for him that it does for us today. Thus in 1 Cor 7:3-4 he could require a man to “pay back to his wife what he owes her” (i.e., her right to sexual relations; *opheilēn apodidotō*) because “the husband does not have exclusive rights [*exousiazei*] over his own, but the wife does.” In other words, the husband too is “owned.” Lev 18:6-18; 20:12-21 include a number of restrictions on the father so the main interest of the laws cannot be protection of the father’s autocratic control of the family. Ownership on the part of the father in 1 Cor 5:1 is not the reason why incest is wrong; rather, it explains why sex with a stepmother is incest. Incest itself is wrong for other reasons. Lev 20:19, for example, forbids a man having sex with his aunt, not because it is

indicates that the incestuous man himself had already made his case to the community that his behavior was morally correct. In Paul's estimate (and this may have been confirmed in the oral reports he received, 5:1), the incestuous man was past the stage of being receptive to admonitions—even if the community had yet to admonish him.<sup>24</sup>

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an affront to his uncle but rather because to commit such an act is to have sex with “one's own flesh.” Lev 18:17 forbids a man having sex with a woman and her daughter or a woman and her granddaughter because “they are your flesh” (or: “her flesh”; a text-critical problem).

<sup>24</sup> Explanations vary as to how the Corinthian church could not only permit such a relationship but also brag about it (5:2, 6). Either this was an example of extreme libertinism among pneumatics (“all things are lawful”) or, more simply, a select case in which the “wise” at Corinth thought there was good reason to disregard this particular social convention for this particular set of circumstances. If the latter, approval of the relationship could have been justified, for example, on the basis of an absence of real blood ties between stepmothers and stepsons; little age difference between the two, with the father dead; and/or vindication of the relationship by the courts. John K. Chow suggests that the man may have married the stepmother after his father's death simply to prevent the stepmother from remarrying outside the family and taking her assets with her (cf. the two mentions of “the greedy” after sexually immoral persons in 5:10-11). If the man were also a patron of the Corinthian community, the support of the Corinthian church would have the added dimension of financial self-interest (*Patronage and Power: A Study of Social Networks in Corinth* [JSNTSup 75; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992] 135-41). If, further, the man married the woman but kept the relationship “platonic” (as 1 Corinthians 7 suggests some of the Corinthians were doing in their marriages), the Corinthian “strong” could argue that there was no technical violation of ethical codes. Or, if the stepmother had not given birth to her own children, the Corinthians could have justified the relationship by an appeal to levirate marriage in Genesis 38 or Deut 25:5-10 (requiring a man to marry his sister-in-law if his brother died without leaving her a son; cf. Lev 18:16; 20:21 which prohibit all marriages between a brother- and sister-in-law). In Genesis 38 Tamar has intercourse with her father-in-law Judah and is declared by Judah to be “more in the right than I” (38:26). The Corinthians could have argued that the situation between a man and his stepmother was not much different. Any solution is necessarily speculative. Whatever the basis for their inflated pride and boasting (and the wording of 5:2 and 5:6 suggests bragging because of, not in spite of, their handling of this case of incest), the Corinthian “strong” are likely to have justified their actions by the same means that they justified eating idol meat in an idol's temple (1 Corinthians 8, 10): the possession of knowledge about the true reality of things that enabled them to transcend mere social constructions of reality (8:4-7; 10:23).

Some scholars assume that Paul's primary reason for insisting on excommunication of the incestuous man was the community's supportive stance toward the man's conduct, with Paul acting in apparent frustration. A slightly different twist is given by Richard Horsley: “since there was apparently no community with already established norms in Corinth, let alone an institutionalized structure of authority, Paul was desperate to instill some authority in the situation. He had virtually no choice but to resort to devices such as symbolic sanctions, threats, and even psychic coercion” (*1 Corinthians* [ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998] 84). In essence, Paul overreacted—but, given the circumstances we can forgive him for it. Implicit in both positions is the assumption that under normal circumstances (i.e., if the congregation had done its duty in discouraging incest or if adequate institutional structures had been present) excommunication of a Christian believer engaged in incest would not have been necessary. However, these attempts at particularizing Paul's call for excommunication will not work. First, Paul could just as easily have demanded (indeed, more easily) that the congregation start preaching against incest. Calling for a formal meeting to excommunicate a member necessitated a higher level of social cohesion and institutional structure than informal admonition on the part of leaders of the church. Second, allusions to Levitical and Deuteronomic law in 1 Corinthians 5 (see below) make clear that Paul's advocacy of expulsion was based on *Scripture's* assessment of incest as a transgression meriting excommunication or death, not on the Corinthians' complacency. Third, the act of delivering the incestuous man to Satan had as its ultimate goal the eternal salvation of the offender, not the rebuke of the Corinthian community. True love for the incestuous man required expulsion, not only for the sake of the community but also for the sake of the incestuous man. Fourth, given the impenitent stance of the incestuous man, a mere “slap on the wrist” (disapproval but maintenance of fellowship) would not have satisfied Paul's concern to keep the “leaven” from “leavening the whole batch of dough.” Healthy boundaries between the church (as the sphere of



Second, Paul believed that persistent, unrepentant conduct of this sort would disqualify the perpetrator from inheriting God's kingdom (cf. 6:9-10). Paul intended the act of expulsion to be an extension of communal mourning (not gloating) over the man's disastrous fall into sin (5:2).<sup>25</sup> Excommunication was a last-ditch measure, enacted in the hope that the wrongdoer's "spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (5:5); a remedial, not essentially punitive, action (cf. 2 Cor 2:5-11). The penultimate purpose was the destruction of "the flesh": the "old human being" (Rom 6:6) under the dominion of sinful impulse operating in the body of flesh, the person oriented toward the self and away from God. The ultimate purpose was the salvation of "the spirit": the "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15) under the dominion of the Spirit indwelling temporarily the body of flesh, the person oriented toward the service of God and eagerly expecting to be clothed with a spiritual body.<sup>26</sup>

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Christ's dominion) and the world (the sphere of Satan's rule, in Paul's view) demanded the expulsion of members who trampled on the Spirit of holiness.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. 2 Cor 12:21: "(I fear) that when I come again my God may humble me before you and I may have to mourn over many of those who have sinned previously and who did not repent at the impurity and sexual immorality (*porneia*) and licentiousness which they engaged in." Mourning probably also had the function of demonstrating to God the absence of communal complicity in the offender's sin and appealing to God to spare the community. According to Rosner, "Paul thought the Corinthians ought to 'mourn' in the sense of confessing the sin of the erring brother as if it was their own" (as in Ezra 10:6; Neh 1:4; Dan 10:2; 1 Esdr 8:72; 9:2; *Paul, Scripture and Ethics*, 72).

<sup>26</sup> In view of Rom 6:6 ("our old person was crucified with [Christ] in order that [*hina*] the body of sin might be put out of action"), it is probably better to see two purpose clauses in 1 Cor 5:5, the first penultimate (*eis*, "for") and the second ultimate (*hina*, "in order that"), rather than view the first as denoting merely result and the second alone denoting purpose (as Fee does, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 209).

The meaning of "hand over such a person to Satan" is relatively secure (cf. 1 Tim 1:20 for similar language). Paul thought that, in being put out of the community where the Spirit of Christ holds sway, the wrongdoer would be left unprotected in the sphere of Satan's dominion, the world (cf. 2 Cor 4:4: Satan as "the god of this world-age"). Because Paul felt that such a handing over to Satan could lead to the ultimate salvation of the wrongdoer, it is likely that he viewed Satan as an unwitting instrument in God's hands for tormenting the expelled member. Such a view of Satan can be found in Paul's interpretation of his "thorn in the flesh" as a "messenger/angel of Satan" given to him by God as a means of keeping him "from being too elated by the abundance of revelations" (2 Cor 12:7). A similar point is made in Job 1:12 ("I give in your hand") and 2:6 ("I hand him over to you"; LXX). Given the Passover allusions to leaven and the paschal lamb in 1 Cor 5:6-8, Paul may have had in mind the image of the "Destroyer" (Exod 12:23) who threatens those whose doorposts are not covered by the blood of the paschal lamb. The offender is to be expelled from the safety of "God's building" (3:9; Richard Hays, *First Corinthians* [IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1997] 85).

Scholars are divided into two main camps over the interpretation of "destruction of the flesh": (1) a reference to the total physical destruction of the person (i.e., death) as a means of making amends for the wrongdoer's sin (punishment in this life to avoid punishment in the next) or as a means of preventing the further accumulation of sin (cf. 1 Cor 11:30; Acts 5:1-10; Heb 2:14; Wisd Sol 4:10-11; Josephus, *War* 2.143-44); (2) a reference to the destruction of the carnal impulse responsible for the sinful behavior in question (cf. Gal 5:24). This might be accomplished by the emotional anguish which the incestuous person would feel from being excluded from the fellowship of the saints and/or by non-lethal physical suffering, including sickness. The suffering would hopefully bring about the man's repentance and lead to his reintegration into the community of the Spirit.

For supporters of the first position, cf. BAGD *s.v.* *olethros*; Forkman, *The Limits of the Religious Community*, 143-47 (the cursed fornicator is to be subjected to "material losses, personal tragedies, illnesses, and finally death....total destruction.... The punishment of the fornicator means that he can already now expiate his offense.... The community's drastic measure will hasten the same process for the fornicator

as the Christian continually has to go through”); Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 97 (“The destruction of the flesh can hardly mean anything else but death [cf. 11:30]”); Fascher, *Der Erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, 1.160-61 (Paul does not say precisely whether he has physical death in mind, “but he probably assumes it”); Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 126-27 (“the offender’ flesh...does not mean only the flesh as a source of moral evil...but the physical flesh itself.... Suffering at least is meant..., probably death”); Roetzel, *Judgment in the Community*, 119-24; Ernst Käsemann, “Sentences of Holy Law in the New Testament,” *New Testament Questions Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 71 (“the punishment obviously entails the death of the guilty”); Gerald Harris, “The Beginnings of Church Discipline: 1 Corinthians 5,” *NTS* 37 (1991) 1-21 (an essentially punitive, and permanent, measure); and Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Function of ‘Excommunication’ in Paul,” *HTR* 73 (1980) 251-63 (though for Collins Paul interprets the “destruction of the flesh” “communally and eschatologically,” with reference to “the fiery trial of all creation” at the End, when the incestuous man “would be physically destroyed...and eternally damned”).

Advocates of the second position include: Schrage, *Der Erste Brief an die Korinther*, 1.376-77 (a range of “earthly judgments” including spiritual and physical punishments; perhaps including death?); Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 208-13 (non-physical sufferings, particularly the pain arising from “separation from the fellowship of the people of God”); Fee and South [below] provide the most vigorous rebuttals of the first position); Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 158 (Paul “hopes that this shock therapy, expulsion of the man, might douse his sinful inclinations and shame him, which in the Greco-Roman culture was often thought of as a fate worse than death”); James T. South, “A Critique of the ‘Curse/Death’ Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 5.1-8,” *NTS* 39 (1993) 539-61; Hays, *First Corinthians*, 85-86; Richard A. Horsley, *1 Corinthians*, 80; Murphy-O’Connor, *1 Corinthians*, 42 (“Anyone who had experienced the security, protection, and encouragement afforded by such love would, he believed, suffer severe pain when cast out into the cold egocentricity of the ‘world’”); Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, Sex*, 200, 201 n. 8; Robertson and Plummer, *1 Corinthians*, 99 (physical and spiritual punishments; perhaps including death?); and Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (LCC 21; ed. J. T. McNeill; trans. F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 1233-34 (Book IV, ch. XII, sec. 5); idem, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 108-9.

The closest parallel to 1 Cor 5:5, 1 Tim 1:20, suggests hope for reform and reintegration of the wrongdoer back into the community, as does 2 Cor 2:5-11. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assert that the first position is thereby excluded. Despite some differences with 5:5, Paul’s discussion in 11:30-32 is relevant. Paul believed that the physical “chastening” or “disciplining” of the offenders at the Lord’s Supper occurred “in order that we might not be condemned with the world” (11:32). The inference is that Paul thought that God was capable of disciplining wayward believers with physical afflictions, including death, as a means of preserving their elect status (cf. Job 1-2 for physical torment as a means of testing fidelity; and 2 Cor 12:7 for physical torment as a preventive measure against sin). Paul did not equate “flesh” with the physical body but there was significant overlap between the two. Consequently, Paul probably regarded physical torment as one of many options open to God to get the recalcitrant sinner’s attention, to requite the sinner for sin (short of damnation), and/or to prevent the wrongdoer’s sin from accumulating more than it already had.

Some have argued that the purpose clause “in order that the spirit (*to pneuma*) may be saved in the day of the Lord” refers not to the man’s spirit but to the Holy Spirit. Cf. Collins, “The Function of ‘Excommunication’ in Paul,” 259-63 (who traces the interpretation back to Tertullian, *On Modesty* 13); Donfried, “Justification and Last Judgment in Paul,” *Int* 30 (1976) 150-51. If this were the case, then the text would say nothing about the restoration of the wrongdoer. At best, it would indicate a lack of concern on Paul’s part for the incestuous man’s fate; at worse, a permanent consignment of the wrongdoer to final destruction. In response, the omission of *autou* (“his”) is not a problem for translating the definite article as “his” since the article “often takes the place of an unemphatic possessive pronoun when there is no doubt as to the possessor” (Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, §1121). That consideration makes “his spirit” a plausible reading, though it does not mandate it. The chief problem with interpreting *to pneuma* as “the Spirit” is understanding in what sense the Spirit would “be saved (*sōthēi*) in the day of the Lord.” It appears forced to press the language of 5:5b into the meaning which Collins gives: “If they have lived in accordance with the Spirit, it will be preserved or kept safe for the community” (p. 260); or, with Donfried, “so that God’s Spirit may continue to be present and thus preserve the congregation for the last day” (p. 150). Humans,

Third, on pragmatic grounds, Paul regarded incest as a conspicuous and easily identifiable instance of shameful sin that the church could readily take action against and not just leave to God's direct, and often eschatological, judgment (5:9-13). It was the unambiguous nature of the offense that elicited both Paul's expression of outrage in 5:1-2 and his resolute declaration to the Corinthians of the obvious verdict of "our Lord Jesus" in 5:3-5 ("I have *already* passed judgment...").<sup>27</sup> There was no need for the Corinthian community to deliberate at length over "what would Jesus do" (to use a contemporary expression). Incest could under no circumstances be excused or explained away.

Fourth, and most importantly, Paul regarded toleration of sexual immorality among believers to have an especially pernicious impact in undermining the moral standards of the community as a whole ("a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough," 5:6-8), a situation which invited God's judgment on the community (5:13, citing Deut 17:7).<sup>28</sup>

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not the Spirit, are always the object of "saving" in Paul. A little more promising is the variant interpretation offered by Dale Martin, which understands both "flesh" and "spirit" in a (primary) collective and (secondary) individual sense (*The Corinthian Body* [New Haven: Yale University, 1995] 168-74). "Paul's primary worry is that the pneuma of Christ's body will become polluted by the corrupting presence of the sinful sarx represented by the body of the immoral man.... The pneuma that needs to be saved is both the pneuma of the man and that of the church; the sarx that must be destroyed is both that of the man and that of the church" (pp. 169, 174; similarly, Barth Campbell, "Flesh and Spirit in 1 Cor 5:5: An Exercise in Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament," *JETS* 36 [1993] 331-42). Martin understands *sōthēi* in the sense of "be made healthy." However, Martin exaggerates the extent to which Paul was incapable of distinguishing the individual from the collective. Paul sees the two as closely related but, like any other first-century writer, he is able to conceive of the destruction of the flesh of a single individual. The easiest reading of the "the flesh" (and thus of "the spirit") is to connect it with the "such a person" (*toiouton*) mentioned four words earlier. It is not the collective "flesh" of the congregation that it is to be destroyed by the excommunication of a single member. The only "flesh" that will be subjected to affliction is the "flesh" of the expelled man.

<sup>27</sup> It is not clear whether the phrase "in the name of the Lord Jesus" goes with "I have already passed judgment," "the one who thus perpetrated this deed," or "when you have gathered together." The first (cf. 2 Thess 3:6) or third (cf. Matt 18:20) options are more likely than the second; and word order suggests the first. Regardless of which option one chooses, the tenor of chap. 5 makes clear that all sides (the perpetrator of the incest, the Corinthian church, and Paul) believed that they were acting "in the name of the Lord Jesus."

<sup>28</sup> Cf. the concerns for protecting the holiness and purity of the community expressed in Levitical Holiness Code (e.g., Lev 18:24-30) and Deuteronomic law. The idea that the sins of some in the community of God's people endangers the whole community finds frequent and clear expression in the Holiness Code and in Deuteronomy but it is hardly limited to these texts. One can find the theme, for example, throughout the Pentateuch (J, E, P), in the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua through Kings), in the pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic prophets, in the Chronicler, and the Psalms. For a comprehensive survey of intertextual connections in 1 Corinthians 5, especially with the Book of Deuteronomy, and the theme of the corporate responsibility of the people of God, cf. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture and Ethics*, 61-93 (citing Exod 16:27-28; Num 16:24-27; Deut 23:14; 29:19-21; Joshua 7:1; 22:16-18; 1 Sam 14:37-38; Ezra 10:6-8; Neh 1:4; 8:9; 13:18; Dan 10:2; 1 Esdr 8:72; 9:2). Even apart from an increase in sinful behavior, the Corinthian church itself would incur guilt before God for failing to take action against a major transgression of God-ordained ethical boundaries. In shirking its responsibility to remove a grave evil from its midst, the church, and not just the individual wrongdoer, would be held responsible by God. The sin of defiling "God's temple," the community of believers as the dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16-17), would be imputed to the church as a whole, leaving the entire church, not just the perpetrator of the act, exposed to God's judgment. Cf. Lev 19:17 ("reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself"); Ezek 33:7-9 ("So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give

Paul hoped that the excommunicated member would yet be saved “in the day of the Lord” but there was no guarantee of that occurring. The one thing which the Corinthian church could take ownership of was its position toward all forms of sexual immorality. Excommunication would serve as a powerful deterrent against further serious breeches of the covenant and absolve the community of responsibility for the wrongdoer’s sin.<sup>29</sup>

It is doubtful that what Paul meant by “a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough” (5:6; cf. Gal 5:9) was that toleration of one case of incest would lead to a rash of incest cases in the church—much less that there was some sort of magical dimension to sin’s contaminating power.<sup>30</sup> More likely, he felt that if the church could not take a firm stand against such an obvious and severe violation of sexual standards its resistance to other types of sexual immorality, and to sin in general, would be weakened beyond repair. The church could hardly maintain a rigid line against fornication, prostitution, adultery, same-sex intercourse, bestiality, or any non-sexual sin once it sent a clear message that it would do nothing about incest. If it did not refuse association with such a sexually immoral person, it could not rightfully refuse association with any other immoral person. If it could not refuse association with immoral persons, it could not require moral behavior on the part of its members. If it could not require moral behavior on the part of its members, it would cease to be the body of Christ. Christ could no longer be Lord of the community in any functional sense.

Moreover, the prominence Paul gave to the regulation of sexual passions in the paraenetic sections of his letters suggests that he recognized there was something particularly dangerous about an unregulated impulse to have sex.<sup>31</sup> The temptation to engage in improper sexual behavior was too great an ongoing threat to the Christian

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them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked ones, you shall surely die,’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked..., you will have saved your life”); Acts 20:26-27 (“I am not responsible for the blood of any of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God”) [NRSV].

<sup>29</sup> Cf. the refrain in Deuteronomy that follows efforts at “purging the evil from your midst”: “Then all Israel shall hear and be afraid, and never again do such wickedness” (13:11); “All the people will hear and be afraid, and will not act presumptuously again” (17:13); “The rest shall hear and be afraid, and a crime such as this shall never again be committed among you” (19:20).

<sup>30</sup> He was probably concerned, though, that destigmatizing incestuous behavior would make any other occurrence of incest difficult to discipline. A slight increase in incest cases might result from communal toleration.

<sup>31</sup> This is true not only of Paul but also of Jews in general in the ancient world (cf., e.g., the attention to sexuality in *1 Enoch*, *Jubilees*, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, *Joseph and Aseneth*, Philo, Josephus, and the Qumran community), and of much of the Greco-Roman culture to which they belonged (though more pronounced in Judaism). Indeed, most cultures, in most times, recognize this. Cf. 1 Thess 4:3-8; 1 Corinthians 5-7; 10:8; 11:2-16; 2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19-21; Rom 1:24-27; 6:19; 7:2-3, 7-12; 13:13-14; cf. Col 3:5; Eph 4:19, 22; 5:3-5; 1 Tim 1:9-11; 2:9; 3:2, 12; 5:11; 2 Tim 2:22; Tit 1:6. We have already noted the link between the “impurity” or “uncleanness” of Rom 6:19 and the mention of the same in Rom 1:24. The reference is not limited to sexual impurity but has the sexual dimension in the forefront. The same could be said for Rom 7:7-12 (perhaps 7:7-25). The command “you shall not desire/covet” is an allusion to the tenth commandment (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21, LXX) in which coveting a neighbor’s wife figures prominently (cf. the similar language of 1 Thess 4:3-8, where, incidentally, “impurity” also refers to sexual immorality).

community to permit a significant breach in the community's moral resolve. Perhaps more than any other desire, proper management of the desire for sex required rigid boundaries, precisely because it was too pleasurable, too insatiable, too oriented toward immediate gratification, too prone to self-rationalization and idolatrous addiction, and (potentially) too disruptive for the maintenance of loving and stable relationships to be allowed free expression.

The particularly compulsive and unambiguous character of immoral sexual behavior may help to explain why the only clear instance we have in the undisputed Pauline corpus of Paul recommending excommunication occurs in a case of gross sexual immorality. To be sure, Paul lists other types of offenders with whom the believers at Corinth should not associate with, which he gives in two lists (5:10 and 5:11). With these can be compared the list of people in 6:9-10 whom Paul claimed would be excluded from the kingdom of God. 6:9-11 contains all the types of sinners mentioned in 5:10-11, plus four additional ones (three expanding on the meaning of "sexually immoral people," plus thieves). Plural forms are used in 5:10 and 6:9-10; singular forms in 5:11. Translations are given for the first occurrence of each Greek word.

5:10	5:11	6:9-10
<i>pornoi</i> (the sexually immoral, fornicators)	<i> pornos</i>	<i>pornoi</i>
<i>pleonektai</i> (the greedy, covetous)	<i>pleonektēs</i>	<i>eidōlōlatrai</i>
<i>harpages</i> (robbers, swindlers)	<i>eidōlōlatrēs</i>	<i>moichoi</i> (adulterers)
<i>eidōlōlatrai</i> (idolaters)	<i>loidoros</i> (slanderer, reviler)	<i>malakoi</i>
	<i>methusos</i> (drunkard)	<i>arsenokoitai</i>
	<i>harpax</i>	<i>kleptai</i> (thieves)
		<i>pleonektai</i>
		<i>methusoi</i>
		<i>loidoroi</i>
		<i>harpages</i>

Brian Rosner has demonstrated that the list in 5:11 is not accidental. In 5:13 Paul quoted a formula that appears six times in Deuteronomy (LXX), each time to signal the execution of various wrongdoers: "Drive out (or purge) the wicked person from among yourselves." In five of these (13:5 excluded, whose wording in Greek differs slightly from the rest), the subject matter and order is remarkably similar to the list in 5:11: 17:7 (idolatry); 19:19 (malicious false testimony); 21:21 (the rebellious son who is also a drunkard); 22:21 (sexual promiscuity); 24:7 (theft).<sup>32</sup> Paul cited the Deuteronomic

<sup>32</sup> Rosner, *Paul, Scripture and Ethics*, 69-70. If one moves the subject of sexual immorality in the Deuteronomic sequence from fourth place to first, to accommodate (as Paul probably did) for the fact that sexual immorality was at issue in 1 Corinthians 5, the rest of the Deuteronomic sequence squares with the order in 1 Cor 5:11. Although there is nothing in the Deuteronomic list corresponding to *pleonektēs*, this word is linked with *harpages* in 1 Cor 5:10 as a single concept. Paul may have added *pleonektēs* to the list and placed it second because of incestuous man's wealth or monetary motivation for entering into a relationship with his stepmother. Rosner acknowledges that "[t]he five correspondences, though remarkable, do not fit perfectly: only in 22:20-21 is the same terminology used; the key issue in 21:21 is disobedience (drunkenness is only a symptom); and 24:7 concerns theft of persons (though *harpax* may

refrain to support his point that the incestuous man should be expelled from the congregation and then drew on the general categories warranting expulsion from the contexts in which this refrain occurred. In short, he relied on scripture. The lists in 1 Corinthians 5-6 are not exhaustive,<sup>33</sup> but they provide a fairly representative sample of the kinds of moral transgressions (persistent and unrepentant) that could lead to excommunication.

Worship of other gods:	<i>eidōlōlatrai</i> (idolaters)
Sexual immorality:	<i>pornoi</i> (the sexually immoral, incl. fornicators, those committing incest)
	<i>moichoi</i> (adulterers)
	<i>malakoi</i> (passive, effeminate partners in same-sex intercourse)
	<i>arsenokoitai</i> (the active partners in same-sex intercourse)
Economic exploitation:	<i>kleptai</i> (thieves)
	<i>pleonektai</i> (the greedy, the covetous)
	<i>harpages</i> (robbers, swindlers)
Communal damage	<i>loidoroi</i> (slanderers, revilers)
Intemperance	<i>methusoi</i> (drunkards)

The last category, drunkards (understood as habitual behavior), is less its own distinctive category and more a catalyst for other vices. Both Greco-Roman and Jewish moralists criticized drunkenness because of what it led to: sexually promiscuous behavior, aggression and violence, offensive speech, and generally destructive conduct (e.g., *T. Judah* 14-16). The term *loidoros* denotes someone who is verbally abusive; someone who slanders, mocks, demeans, or curses others. As a vice it belongs with other vices that threaten community solidarity, such as those mentioned in Gal 5:20: “hatreds, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, envyings.” The three vices having to do with economic exploitation have overlapping meaning. Even *pleonektai* (literally, those who have, or try to have, more) often connotes someone who exploits, defrauds, cheats, extorts, or generally takes advantage of another for personal gain, including unjust seizure of the property of others. It is not simply a desire for a little more money.<sup>34</sup> The category of idolatry could be conceived as a metonym for a range of beliefs and behaviors that call into question singular devotion to the God of Jesus Christ.<sup>35</sup>

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denote robbery of any description)” (pp. 69-70 n. 41).

<sup>33</sup> Paul adapted vice lists to the situations he addressed, by adding or subtracting vices, and/or altering the order. Cf. the vice lists in Gal 5:19-20; 2 Cor 12:20-21; Rom 1:29-31; 13:13.

<sup>34</sup> Although usually used of exploitative desire for material gain, it is also employed for an obsession with fame, power, or physical desires that leads to the exploitation of others (as in 1 Thess 4:6). Cf. G. Delling, “πλεονέκτη” κτλ.,” *TDNT* 6.266-74. Paul defended himself against the charge that he had used his apostolic office and the proclamation of the gospel to exploit his churches for personal gain (1 Thess 2:5; 2 Cor 7:2; 9:5; 12:17-18, where the cognate verb *pleonekteō* or abstract noun *pleonexia* are used).

<sup>35</sup> The number of theological “heresies” for which Paul was willing to go to the mat, so to speak, focused

From this discussion of “behaviors that can get Christians excommunicated from the church and the coming kingdom of God,” two things of importance stand out. One is that, theoretically at least, Paul thought that a wide range of misbehaviors could justify excommunication. The other is that, in practice, based on what we know from Paul’s undisputed letters, Paul was normally reticent about invoking excommunication.<sup>36</sup> Certainly, as we noted in a review of the issues in 1 Corinthians (above), there were many other instances besides the one case of incest in which Paul could have recommended excommunication but declined to do so. What that suggests is that, for Paul, the church had a heavy burden of proof to meet before it could move to a definitive exclusion from the church of “greedy people” and “revilers”—so heavy that nowhere do we clearly find that burden being met in the extant, undisputed letters of Paul. The person described in 2 Cor 2:5-11; 7:12 who wronged Paul in some way (slander?) was subjected to “punishment” by the Corinthian community (2:6) but we do not know what the punishment was. Occasionally Paul threatens to come to a church with a heavy, disciplinary hand (1 Cor 4:18-21; 2 Cor 12:20-13:4). If Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, then we could attribute to Paul an occasion when he insisted that those who extorted food from other believers (economic exploitation) should be isolated from the church, at least during meals (3:6-15). The Pastoral Epistles, if written by Paul (most scholars argue against Pauline authorship), would provide a few additional examples where Paul advised disassociation from specific teachers (outsiders?) who brought with them a mix of doctrinal errors, divisive methods, and economic exploitation. In Rom 16:17-20 Paul exhorted the Roman believers to avoid “those who cause dissensions and put up stumbling-blocks.” The reference is vague. It may refer to outside missionaries, not members of one of the churches at Rome. In Galatians, Philippians 3, and 2 Corinthians 10-13, Paul has very harsh things to say about invading Jewish-Christian missionaries. However, these missionaries were not members of Paul’s churches so the application of the term excommunication is questionable. Thus, considering the number of examples of sinful behavior in the churches Paul addressed, Paul shows remarkably little inclination to press for excommunication. If people were going to be evicted for greed or reviling, the cases would have to be easily provable, particularly deplorable, repeated, and self-affirming instances. He obviously did not conceive of these categories of sin so broadly that the net of culpability would extend to a large proportion of any given community of believers.

Categories based on sex acts (incest, adultery, fornication, same-sex intercourse) are more easily defined. Of course, in the broader sense, people may commit adultery in their hearts (Matt 5:27-30). But that is not what Paul was talking about when he listed adulterers among those from whom the church should separate. Either a person commits adultery or a person does not commit adultery. There is very little middle ground. Moreover, most Christians do not commit adultery. With some of the other

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on a few central elements of the gospel: God’s accomplishment of redemption through the atoning death, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ to the status of cosmic Lord; salvation through faith and apart from the one ritual-entry requirement of the Mosaic law (circumcision).

<sup>36</sup> How reticent Paul was depends on one’s evaluation of the authorship of 2 Thessalonians and the Pastoral Epistles; also on one’s reading of 2 Cor 2:5-11.

“excommunicable” offenses Paul cites—greed, for example—it is very different. Virtually all believers, then and now, exhibit greed at one level or another. Drawing the line between too much greed and greed within limits has never been an easy thing for the church to do. In Paul’s world acquisition of property and money could be justified on grounds other than greed (for example, capital was needed to provide patronage for Christian missionaries and churches). In today’s world monetary issues are even more complex. Humanitarian efforts and programs for Christian outreach often require enormous amounts of capital. Of course, few American Christians have escaped the disease of materialism. Yet that makes church discipline of greed even more difficult. Almost by definition, excommunication has to be a procedure reserved for the few, not the many. And what one locality, or one country, defines as greed, another may not. A greedy person is a more slippery and ambiguous classification for the church than some other classifications for “economic exploiters,” such as thieves and swindlers. The same problems apply to the categories of verbal abusers and to those who cause dissensions. Virtually all Christians, then and now, manifest these vices at some level and at punctuated points of life. Tempers flare over various issues—sometimes it is justifiable, sometimes not. The very act of excommunication brings about official division in a church between the wrongdoer and the rest of the community. When Paul encountered injudicious comments and quarrels in his churches (as he often did), he generally employed a combination of reason, encouragement, and admonition to bring about resolution. It is usually easier to take back words than it is to take back an act of sexual intercourse. In short, some types of sinners and sins are easier to identify and thus easier to subject to discipline than others.

One final point bears mentioning here: there are very few “self-affirming” greedy people, thieves, drunkards, and violent people. A person charged with being violent, greedy, or verbally abusive may quarrel with whether the description fits the behavior in question, but s/he is unlikely to make a positive case for the abstract category. In such cases a confrontation of an alleged offender that brings with it clear and convincing evidence may be more likely to get at least a partial admission of guilt than in the case of those who engage in same-sex intercourse, incest, or fornication. Many sexual sins are by their very nature self-justifying. People do them because they do not agree with the assessment of others that such actions are in and of themselves bad. That poses a serious obstacle to attempts by the church to secure repentance, making it more likely that a case will reach the fourth stage of Matthew’s outline of church discipline. It may look like sexual offenders are being singled out for severe discipline when the reality is that sexual sins are more likely to be characterized by impenitence. Certainly this was true in the case of the incestuous man at Corinth who apparently did not believe that he was doing anything wrong.

The bottom line is that Paul was willing to live with a certain amount of ambiguity and inconsistency in exercising the church’s right to excommunicate wayward members. Like the Matthean community, he recognized that not all patterns of sinful behavior could be dealt with by church excommunication in the present age. As the early church strove for greater consistency in its application of discipline, it had to find a way between two extremes: on the one hand, the illusion that discipline could create a pure church and on



the other hand the dogmatism that discipline should never be employed to create a purer church. It was never an all-or-nothing deal for the church: either treat all sins the same and practice discipline equally in all cases or cease discipline altogether. Contemporary churches should likewise strive for greater consistency in their application of church discipline, particularly in conspicuous instances where believers participate in the economic exploitation and personal abuse of others. At the same time churches should not give up the task of continuing to discipline believers for more-easily-identifiable, but nonetheless gravely serious, infractions of Christian morality.

#### **IV. A Critique of Arguments for Granting Membership to Practicing, Self-Affirming Homosexual Persons**

These last comments about the contemporary church setting lead into a discussion of objections to applying first-century disciplinary practices to our own time. Here my dialogue partners are primarily those biblical scholars and theologians who agree that same-sex intercourse is morally wrong but who also think homosexual persons who confess faith in Christ should be allowed membership in the church, regardless of whether they are practicing and self-affirming.<sup>37</sup> Among the fine work available, the comments by Richard Hays, Marion Soards, and Stanley Grenz<sup>38</sup> stand out.<sup>39</sup> These

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<sup>37</sup> Scholars who do not believe that same-sex intercourse is wrong employ arguments that have validity only if one agrees with that fundamental premise. They argue, for example, that denying membership to self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons will inhibit acceptance of their homosexual identity. We have argued throughout the book that homosexual persons should not be affirming such an identity.

<sup>38</sup> Grenz offers a modified position: not all p/sa homosexual persons can be “members in good standing” but only those “persons living in stable same-sex relationships” (*Welcoming But Not Affirming*, 133). This is a problematic position, perhaps even more problematic than opening membership up to *all* p/sa homosexual persons. First, by analogy, it is the equivalent of saying that the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5 should not have been excommunicated if he was in a *stable* incestuous relationship. According to the biblical witness, what is offensive about same-sex intercourse is not that it usually occurs in the setting of unstable relationships but rather that it violates God’s will and nature’s design for the pairing of the sexes. 1 Cor 6:9-10 and 1 Tim 1:10 do not specify exclusion from the kingdom of God (and, by extension, from the church) only for people who engage in same-sex intercourse in the context of unstable relationships. Paul expresses disgust in Rom 1:24-27 for the fact that same-sex intercourse is same-sex, not for its lack of stability. We can grant that unstable homosexual relationships are morally worse than stable ones, just as unstable incestuous or polygamous relationships may be morally worse than stable ones, but the question of stability is not what defines the behavior as wrong. Up until his final chapter, Grenz too directs his arguments entirely against the wrongness of same-sex intercourse per se, not the wrongness of unstable homosexual relationships. Suddenly at the end of the book he pops this distinction on the reader without any biblical or theological underpinnings. This surprise contradicts too his subsequent discussion of ordination, for there he emphasizes that the problem with same-sex intercourse is with the behavior itself, not the way in which it is done (p. 145; cited in the discussion of ordination, below). Second, practically speaking, Grenz’s distinction between stable and unstable homosexual unions is unworkable. How is the church going to define a stable relationship? Does “stable” mean a relationship that lasts more than one night, one week, one month, six months, one year, three years, ten years, or twenty years? What is the benchmark? Public, anonymous homosexual sex or heterosexual marriages? Does the definition of “stable” make provision for “open marriages,” the norm among long-term male couples? Such relationships are stable by homosexual standards, but not by heterosexual standards. Suppose two homosexual partners, in a monogamous relationship for one year want to join a church. Suppose too that neither of the partners has ever been in a homosexual relationship lasting longer than three years and each

scholars do not rule out milder forms of church discipline, such as exhortation and admonition; but they draw the line on membership and excommunication. We will discuss the reasons they give for arriving at a position that endorses membership for p/sa homosexual persons, and add an additional reason. Before doing that, though, it is important to note that none of the three authors ever brings the issue of church membership for p/sa homosexual persons into serious discussion with 1 Corinthians 5. This poses a problem because 1 Corinthians 5 is the biggest hurdle that must be faced if one wants to argue for membership. Soards makes no mention of 1 Corinthians 5. Grenz does mention 1 Corinthians 5 briefly in his epilogue (though not in the context of his discussion of church membership) and then concludes that

all who would become the Lord's disciples and hence join the discipleship community must do so on God's terms, not their own. This entails being willing to leave behind old sinful practices—including unchaste sexual behaviors—so that together we might become a holy people.

So far, so good. However, he immediately follows this observation with the deduction that “the welcoming community...cannot always be an affirming one.”<sup>40</sup> Judging from Grenz's view that homosexual persons in stable same-sex erotic relationships not be excommunicated from the church, what he means by “not affirming” is: “although we would not consider disassociating with you, we disapprove of your actions.” That is *not* the point of 1 Corinthians 5, or of Matt 18:15-20. The point of these texts is: the community that aggressively reaches out to the lost, welcomes those that believe in Jesus, stresses grace, and goes the extra mile to forgive sin, sometimes has to “unwelcome” or disfellowship persons who persistently refuse to repent of serious sin (including sexual sin), for the good of the community and the transgressor. To put it in a more pithy formulation, the welcoming community cannot always be welcoming.<sup>41</sup> There is no sense in which Paul's handling of the case of the incestuous man represents “a welcoming, yet not always affirming, community”<sup>42</sup>—unless one wants to categorize

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have had multiple such relationships. Does this new relationship count as stable? Characterizing a homosexual relationship as stable requires hindsight, not foresight. The vast majority of same-sex unions do not last beyond five years and the few that do are usually non-monogamous. Most of us would not characterize such relationships as stable. So would the church grant membership only after a homosexual couple reached, say, the ten-year mark?

<sup>39</sup> Schmidt's position is unclear to me. In a single paragraph, he seems to suggest that the church should welcome homosexual persons into the church (as members?) while “periodically [making] it clear from the pulpit (and privately in specific cases of concern) that the church represents forgiveness and power to change, and it also exercises redemptive discipline in cases of sexual disobedience, including homosexual acts” (*Straight and Narrow?*, 173). Does “redemptive discipline” include excommunication and under what circumstances? Wold is alone in connecting 1 Corinthians 5 with the issue of disciplining practicing homosexual persons and drawing the conclusion that “the homosexual, like the incestuous person, falls under the law of condemnation, excluding him or her from the kingdom of God and alienation from the church.... [God's grace] permits repatriation to the body of Christ after appropriate repentance, confession, and forgiveness” (*Out of Order*, 201-205).

<sup>40</sup> Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming*, 156-57.

<sup>41</sup> Certainly this is true of belief. The Christian community is welcoming to unbelievers only in the sense that it aggressively reaches out to them in order to love them and persuade them to put their faith in Jesus. It is not welcoming of unbelievers in the usual sense of the term, that is, accepting another as a member of one's community. Refusal to accept the gospel leaves one outside the sphere of the body of Christ.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 157

excommunication with the hope of repentance as “welcoming.” A comparison of 1 Cor 5:10-11 and 6:9-10 with each other, and with the use of the word “welcome” in the context of Romans 14-15 (cf. above) makes clear that in Paul’s view neither the church nor God should “welcome” indefinitely Christian “males who lie with males.” For Grenz, being a disciple of Jesus “entails being willing to leave behind...unchaste sexual behavior” but failure to do so apparently carries no ultimate consequences in terms of excommunication—at least not when that “unchaste sexual behavior” happens to be stable homosexual relationships.

Hays, in a 28-page chapter on homosexuality, mentions 1 Corinthians 5 only in passing:

Thus, to engage in sexual immorality defiles the body of Christ.... the church is analogous (though not identical) to Israel as portrayed in the holiness code. That is the logic behind his demand that the Corinthian church expel the man engaged in a sexual relationship with his stepmother (5:1-13). A similar logic would certainly apply...to the *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* of 1 Corinthians 6:9.<sup>43</sup>

Hays thus grants that allowing members of the church to engage in sexually immoral behavior, including incest and same-sex intercourse, infects the body of Christ with sin and erodes the health of the whole community. He appears to accept the “logic” behind Paul’s demand for excommunication of the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5: “a little leaven leavens the whole lump; clean out the old leaven” (vv. 6-7a). He accepts the fact that the same logic applies in the comparable case of people who engage in same-sex intercourse. Then he ends up by drawing the conclusion, eight pages later, that “If [practicing, self-affirming homosexual persons] are not welcome, I will have to walk out the door along with them, leaving in the sanctuary only those entitled to cast the first stone.”<sup>44</sup> The reasoning is even more puzzling in view of comments on 1 Corinthians 5 which he makes in a book published only one year later:

...[D]iscipline is necessary. This is the most fundamental challenge of 1 Corinthians 5 to the church today.... Our beloved canon within the canon has become Matthew 7:1: “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged,” which we misinterpret to mean, “I won’t judge you if you won’t judge me.” ...This Matthean text...does not in any way preclude the church’s corporate responsibility, as sketched here in 1 Corinthians 5, for disciplining members who flagrantly violate the will of the [*sic*] God for the community. The fact that the church so rarely exercises this disciplinary function is a sign of its unfaithfulness. Our failure to do so is often justified in the name of enlightened tolerance of differences, but in fact ‘tolerance’ can become a euphemism for indifference and lack of moral courage.

Let us speak in terms of specific examples. Only very recently has the church begun to acknowledge instances of sexual abuse of women and children by church leaders and members. The example of 1 Corinthians 5 should encourage us to name such violations for what they are and to exercise swift and severe discipline upon the offenders.... We may hope, as Paul did, that our disciplinary actions might have a transforming and healing effect for the offender, but it is certain that no healing is possible at all without clear public confrontation of the offense. We have somehow deluded ourselves into

<sup>43</sup> Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 391-92.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 400.

believing that the “caring” thing to do is to be infinitely nonjudgmental and inclusive. This is quite simply a demonic lie, for it allows terrible cancerous abuses to continue unchecked in the community. Do we not know that a little cancer corrupts the whole body? Surgery is necessary; clean out the cancer so that the body may be whole.<sup>45</sup>

Now, anyone familiar with the prevailing religiosity of scholars working in mainstream institutions of higher learning knows what courage it takes for a scholar to make such statements. Hays is absolutely right. And yet the examples which he cites of sexual immorality meriting excommunication of the offenders are out of sync with the courageous tenor of the surrounding text. *Of course* sexual abuse of women and children are worthy of “swift and severe discipline upon the offenders.” Who is going to argue with that? That kind of example will get pats on the back even from most of those scholars and church leaders who would (a) balk at applying 1 Corinthians 5 to adulterers, fornicators, and p/sa homosexual persons and (b) normally refer to excommunication as a barbarism from the Dark Ages.<sup>46</sup> The pressing controversy of the contemporary church is not whether to apply discipline there but rather whether to apply it to p/sa homosexual members of the church if, after ample time for repentance, they refuse to repent. On this controversial issue, is the church, by not facing up to its responsibilities “for disciplining members who flagrantly violate the will of God for the community,” demonstrating a “lack of moral courage”? Is it not true in the case of homosexual offenders as well that “no healing is possible at all without clear public confrontation of the offense”? Have we not “somehow deluded ourselves into believing that the ‘caring’ thing to do is to be infinitely nonjudgmental and inclusive”? Is this not “quite simply a demonic lie, for it allows terrible cancerous abuses to continue unchecked in the community”? Should the church not “clean out the cancer so that the body may be whole”?

On that note, let us examine the various reasons which might be given to justify membership for p/sa homosexual persons. In thinking about the merit of each of these reasons, we should keep in mind two “litmus-test questions.” (1) Does the reason address circumstances that the first-century churches could not have anticipated? If not, there would appear to be little reason for discounting the precedent set in scripture for excommunicating, or not entering into membership, unrepentant participants in same-sex intercourse. (2) Would the reason, if applied consistently, bar the church from enrolling or excommunicating members for any offense, no matter how serious? If so, then it can

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<sup>45</sup> Hays, *1 Corinthians*, 89-90.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Horsley, for example, describes the legacy of excommunication in this way: “The established church’s later use of Paul’s statement about the destruction of the flesh so that the spirit might be saved (5:5) to justify the torture and burning of sinners, heretics, and ‘witches’ vividly illustrates the danger of secular and ecclesial rulers arrogating to themselves the power of community discipline in order to suppress doctrinal dissent and social difference” (*1 Corinthians*, 84). Since this is Horsley’s concluding statement in his discussion of 1 Corinthians 5 and he nowhere else speaks positively of the practice of excommunication today, we must assume that he sees no further use for it in the contemporary church. It is right to grieve past abuses of the church. But we might ask whether there is some healthy middle ground between the extreme of depriving the church of the right to excommunicate disruptive members and the opposite extreme of burning people at the stake. Excommunication did not involve “torture and burning” in Paul’s churches; nor does it in contemporary churches. It ends one’s association with a particular local church. No institution invested with the power of discipline, secular or religious, can avoid an abuse of power forever. This is true even of democratic civil government. At the same time, few if any institutions can long survive without the right to discipline harmful behavior.

hardly be a valid reason, unless one wants to argue for a complete abolition of the church's right to exclude people on moral grounds.

There are at least seven possible reasons for disregarding the implications of 1 Corinthians 5 for withholding membership to p/sa homosexual persons. Again, I am assuming the conclusions of the book up till now; namely, that homosexual behavior constitutes a serious sin and that, at least in Paul's view (and probably in the view of all other writers of scripture), the church should disassociate itself from persistently unrepentant Christians engaged in such behavior. We are here inquiring whether, given such conclusions, there are still good grounds for allowing p/sa-homosexual persons to become or remain members of the church.

A. *We are all sinners; faith in Christ, not perfection, is the prerequisite for Christian membership.* This appears to be the main reason, given by those who regard homosexual intercourse as sin, for not withholding membership from p/sa-homosexual persons. Soards contends:

All members of the church are sinners, grateful for forgiveness and seeking to grow in grace. Every church member claims the reality of divine forgiveness, but every church member still experiences the influence of the real power of sin in life.... Perfection is not a prerequisite for a genuine confession of faith in Christ.... The church seeks to include all sinners who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, a practice that means "whosoever will may come." The concern of the church is with a person's faith in Jesus Christ, not with sexuality.<sup>47</sup>

Hays writes:

*Can homosexual persons be members of the Christian church?* This is rather like asking, "Can envious persons be members of the church?" (cf. Rom. 1:29) or "Can alcoholics be members of the church?" De facto, of course, they are. Unless we think that the church is a community of sinless perfection, we must acknowledge that persons of homosexual orientation are welcome along with other sinners in the company of those who trust in the God who justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5).<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Scripture and Homosexuality*, 75-76. In context, the last statement probably has as an understood preface, "As regards the question of membership,..." Soards' book is itself proof that he could hardly have been arguing that one's sexual behavior is of no concern to the church. Soards goes on to quote a 1978 report of the Presbyterian church (PCUSA), part of which states: "The church is not a citadel of the morally perfect; it is a hospital for sinners" (p. 77). While Jesus did compare himself to a physician (Mark 2:17), the analogy of the church as a "hospital" has only limited reference. Sickness is not a moral fault. Sin is. The church is not a giant House of Therapy, although there are some Christians today who would like to see it become that. True, it does offer people comfort, hope, caring fellowship, and understanding. Yet it also calls people to moral accountability. A pedophile, for example, cannot get off the hook of accountability simply by revealing that s/he was molested as a child. Therapy may be needed, but repentance is essential. Imagine the Jesus of Mark's Gospel opening his ministry with the words, "The time has reached fulfillment and the kingdom of God is at hand; now come lie on my couch and tell me about your childhood." The "hospital" metaphor has value for those who, in repentance, recognize their need for help and open their hearts to the tender lordship of Christ's Spirit. It is a not a good metaphor for people who persist in sin, unrepentant. It does not fit the Jesus who recited numerous woes against the Pharisees (Matthew 23 par. Luke 11:37-52) or who referred to adultery in one's heart as an offense for which one could be thrown into hell (Matt 5:27-30).

<sup>48</sup> *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 400.

According to Grenz,

the church ought to minister to, and even provide a spiritual home for, homosexual persons.... lesbians and gays are people whom God values, for whom Jesus died, and to whom the gospel must come. Further, the church is composed of sinners—redeemed sinners to be sure—but sinners nonetheless. It consists of people who are seeking to do God’s will in the midst of the brokenness of life.... The church, therefore, ought not only to minister to all but also to welcome all into membership on the same basis. And this basis consists of personal reception of salvation by faith through Jesus Christ together with personal commitment to discipleship.<sup>49</sup>

Although this is the main reason given for supporting membership for p/sa-homosexual persons, it is probably also the worst reason. If we apply the two litmus-test questions raised above, the argument falls flat. First, we know that the writers of scripture recognized that believers were not perfect. Yet they found no inconsistency in maintaining some moral standards (including sexual ones) for inclusion in the church. As we have already noted, Paul was well aware that the believers in his churches still sinned. That did not stop him from recommending the expulsion of a Christian man engaged in incest. Nor did it stop him from expecting a certain amount of evidence for a transformed life as a way of authenticating conversion. Second, if applied consistently, this principle would make withholding or withdrawing membership impossible under any circumstances. In effect, it is placing all the weight on verbal confession of faith and ignoring the requisite shift from a life of sin to a life of righteousness. If a verbal confession of faith in Christ as Lord does not result in the kind of minimal moral behavior that characterizes submission to Christ’s lordship, the church has no alternative but to regard the confession as phony, or at least as so defective that it warrants withholding membership until appropriate behavior is manifested. If the contemporary church disregards the biblical mandate to disassociate from p/sa homosexual Christians, it has no consistent grounds for upholding the biblical mandate to disassociate from p/sa-Christian adulterers, prostitutes, fornicators, and participants in incest, because scripture considers same-sex intercourse to be at least as bad, if not worse, than all other types of sexual immorality. And if sustained and unrepented sexual immorality could not bar anyone who said “Jesus is Lord” from membership, then it is hard to see what could.

The church has always struck a balance between demanding perfection and settling for perfidy. This balance is most clearly expressed in 1 John 1:6-10: “If we say that we are in partnership with [God] and walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.... If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (cf. 3:4-10). The dialectic between these two statements is dissolved in favor of the second whenever one argues that a p/sa homosexual person cannot be denied membership

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<sup>49</sup> *Welcoming But Not Affirming*, 133. The first sentence of the quote just confuses the issue. No one is denying that God values p/sa homosexual persons, or that Jesus died for them, or that the gospel must go to them. These statements are as true for unbelievers as they are for believers. However, they do not mean that unbelievers should be made members of the church. The last clause of the last sentence rightly states that “personal commitment to discipleship” is one of two conditions for being welcomed into the community of believers. What happens, though, if one is engaged in behavioral patterns that call into question an alleged commitment to discipleship?

because “we are all sinners.” It is no accident that in the prescripts to his letters, Paul usually addressed his readers as “saints” (= “holy ones,” *hagioi*), never as “sinners” (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; cf. Eph 1:1; Col 1:2). In fact, on twenty-one other occasions (thirty-four, if one counts the deutero-Pauline corpus), Paul refers to believers as “saints.”<sup>50</sup> Not once does he ever refer to believers as “sinners.” Never does he make a comment of the sort that the only difference in moral behavior between believers and unbelievers is that the former are sinners saved by grace and the latter are sinners that are not saved. Believers were once sinners (Rom 5:8, 19; Gal 2:15, 17; 1 Tim 1:9). At the point when sinners come to faith in Christ, the term “sinners” becomes a misleading, if not inappropriate, descriptor. Jesus was known for welcoming “sinners and tax collectors,” being their friend, entering their houses, and dining with them (Mark 2:15-17 par.; Luke 15:1-2; Matt 11:19 par. Luke 7:34; Luke 7:37, 39; 19:7). The post-Easter Christian mission to the marginalized of the world was consistent with that example. Yet such association with sinners had to do with pre-conversion outreach, not post-conversion fellowship. Otherwise one would have to argue the dubious proposition that Jesus did not require those who followed him to obey his own teachings. The Lukan Jesus certainly did not expect the tax collector Zacchaeus, or other tax collectors, to continue to defraud people and profit at the expense of his fellow Jews. It was not until Zacchaeus agreed to give half of his possessions to the poor and to pay back four times whatever he acquired by fraud that Jesus proclaimed “Today salvation has come to this house” (19:8-9). In short, Zacchaeus ceased to be a “sinner.” We should expect that the same happened with any prostitutes that may have followed Jesus (cf. Matt 21:32). When they accepted his teaching, they stopped prostituting themselves. Elsewhere in the Gospels “sinners” are usually distinguished from—not identified with—the community of the faithful redeemed.<sup>51</sup> Of course, the implication to draw from all this is not that believers are expected to conduct perfectly sinless lives but rather that they should no longer lead lives that, in the main, can be characterized as under the power of sin. It represents a radically different view of Christian self-identity than the one that persists in contemporary churches.

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<sup>50</sup> Rom 8:27; 12:13; 15:25-26, 31; 16:2, 15; 1 Cor 6:1-2; 14:33; 16:1, 15; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:1, 12; 13:12; Phil 4:21-22; 1 Thess 3:13; Phlm 5, 7; cf. Eph 1:15, 18; 2:19; 3:8, 18; 4:12; 5:3; 6:18; Col 1:4, 12, 26; 2 Thess 1:10 (?); 1 Tim 5:10. Many more references could be added if we included the use of *hagios* as an adjective applied to believers.

<sup>51</sup> Mark 8:38; 14:41 par. (the Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of sinners); Luke 6:32-34 (even sinners love those who love them); 13:2; 15:7, 10 (joy in heaven over one sinner who repents); John 9:31. A similar distinction is made in James 4:8; 5:20; 1 Pet 4:18; and Jude 15. Now, it would be an extreme push of the pendulum to conclude from these texts that believers should never again think of themselves as sinners in any sense. When we act like sinners rather than saints we should acknowledge that and repent. Theophanic visions of the grandeur of God remind us how far we still fall short of eschatological glory. The prophetic call narratives and Job’s encounter with God are classic texts for this point. In the Lukan call story of Peter, Peter, after witnessing Jesus’ miraculous power for the first time, exclaims, “Leave me for I am a sinful man” (5:8). The “Paul” of the Pastoral Letters could say, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost” (1 Tim 1:15; cf. Eph 3:8; but contrast 1 Cor 15:9, where Paul is the most unfit only in relation to the other apostles). The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector reminds us that even a tax collector who oppresses the poor, yet throws himself on God’s mercy, is more likely to get a positive reception from God than a self-righteous Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14). These cautions notwithstanding, the dominant self-image for believers put forward by the New Testament is the transformation from sinners to saints, not from unsaved sinners to saved sinners.

New Testament texts that speak to the then/now distinction in moral behavior clearly underscore the necessity of a transformed life for Christian identity.

Stop deceiving yourselves: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who feminize themselves to entice male sexual partners, nor men who take males to bed...shall inherit the kingdom of God. And *these things some of you were*; but you washed yourselves off, and were made holy (sanctified), and were made righteous (justified) in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God (1 Cor 6:9-11).

But thanks be to God that, though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to the imprint stamped (on your hearts) by teaching..., and, having been liberated from sin, you were made slaves of righteousness.... For *just as you used to present your members as slaves to dirty* (impure, unclean) *behavior* (cf. Rom 1:24-27) and to lawlessness for the purpose of engaging in lawless acts, *so now present your members as slaves to righteousness* for the purpose of engaging in holy acts. For when you were slaves of sin,....you produced fruit...[whose] outcome was death. But now...you produce your fruit for holy purposes, and *the outcome is eternal life* (Rom 6:17-22; cf. 7:5-6; 13:11-14).

So this I say and testify in the Lord, that you *no longer walk* (behave) *in the same way that the gentiles walk* (behave)...who...handed themselves over to licentiousness, for the purpose of acting out every kind of dirty (impure, unclean) behavior in greed (viz., idolatrous greed for sex). But you yourselves did not so learn Christ, if indeed...you were taught in Christ...to put off the old humanity...corrupted by deceitful desires...and to put on the new humanity..., created in righteousness.... *Let no sexual immorality and dirty* (impure, unclean) *behavior...be even named among you, as is fitting for saints....* For you surely know this, that *no sexually immoral person or dirty* (unclean, impure) *person...has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God....* *So do not become their associates*; for you were *once* darkness, *but now* light in the Lord; walk (behave) as children of light (Eph 4:17, 19-24; 5:3, 5, 7-8; cf. Col 3:1-17).

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us in order that, by renouncing impiety and worldly desires, we may live in the present age with self-control (temperance), righteousness, and piety, awaiting the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and savior Jesus Christ, *who gave himself for us, in order that might redeem us from every lawless act and cleanse* (purify) *for himself a people of his own, zealous for good works....* For we ourselves were *once* foolish, disobedient, going astray, enslaved to various desires and pleasures.... But when the kindness and lover of God our savior for humanity appeared, he saved us, not on the basis of works when we ourselves did in righteousness, but in accordance with his mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ...through Jesus Christ our Savior.... I want you to insist on these things, in order that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works (Tit 2:11-14; 3:3-6, 8).

...live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for (or: by) desires of human beings but for the will of God. For *the time which has passed* (viz., your pre-Christian life) *should have sufficed for* (i.e., should have been enough for you to get out of your system) *doing what the gentiles like to do, having lived in licentiousness*, passions, drunkenness, unrestrained partying, drunken orgies, and idolatrous acts—at which they (viz., the gentiles) are surprised when you do not join them in running headlong into the same flood of dissipation, slandering you (1 Pet 4:2-4).

These [false teachers] are waterless springs and mists driven by a windstorm, for whom the gloomy darkness of the netherworld has been reserved. For, mouthing high-sounding



but empty words, *they entice with licentious desires of the flesh those who have barely escaped* the ones who live in error, promising them freedom, though they themselves are slaves of corruption, for by whatever a person has been defeated, to that s/he has been enslaved. For *if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world* through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, *they again become entangled in them and are defeated, the last set of circumstances has become worse for them than the first.* For it would have been *better for them not to have known the way of righteousness than, after knowing it, to turn back* from the holy commandment handed down to them (2 Pet 2:17-21).<sup>52</sup>

John the Baptist administered a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” and exhorted his hearers to “produce fruit worthy of repentance.”<sup>53</sup> Jesus spoke of knowing who the true people of God are by their fruits, not just by the confession of Jesus as Lord (Q / Luke 6:43-49 par.; *G. Thom.* 45; cf. Jas 3:12). With regard to moral behavior and heavenly recompense, “the one who has, it will be given to him; and the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him” (Mark 4:25; cf. *G. Thom.* 41:1-2). This saying also appears as the conclusion to the parable of the talents/minas, in which the servant who does not produce from what has been given him is declared to be “wicked” (Q / Luke 19:11-27 par.). Only the one who does the will of God can be considered a member of Jesus’ family (Mark 3:31-35; *G. Thom.* 99:1-3). As we noted in chap. 1, there are a series of statements in the Jesus tradition pointing clearly to the rigors of discipleship: for example, getting rid of bodily members that endanger one’s entrance into God’s kingdom; carrying one’s cross, losing one’s life to save it, and “hating” one’s own family; refraining from serving two masters; letting “the dead” bury the dead and not looking back; and necessity of counting the cost of discipleship to Jesus.<sup>54</sup> Mark epitomizes Jesus’ message with the proclamation to repentance (1:15 par.) and describes the first sending of the disciples similarly (6:12). The theme of repentance also figures in Q (Luke 10:13; 11:32 par.) and special Lukan traditions (Luke 13:1-5; 15:8-10; 16:30).<sup>55</sup> The risen Christ in Matt 28:19-20 commissioned his followers to “make disciples of all nations..., teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” The Johannine Jesus declares, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.... I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin” (John 8:31-32, 34). In the farewell discourse, he proclaims “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (14:15; cf. 14:21-24); and God “removes every branch in me that bears no fruit” (15:2; cf. 15:3-12). The gospel proclamations to unbelievers recorded in Acts often demanded not just belief but repentance of past conduct.<sup>56</sup> Luke summarized Paul’s gospel message as a call to the gentiles “to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to

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<sup>52</sup> In the Book of Revelation, “fornicators” or “the sexually immoral” (*pornoi*) are listed along with idolaters, sorcerers, murderers, thieves, “dogs” (possibly male homosexual prostitutes), “everyone who loves and practices falsehood,” and those who are unfaithful in the midst of political persecution as those who are earmarked for destruction at the End (9:20-21; 21:8; 22:15).

<sup>53</sup> Mark 1:4 par.; Q / Luke 3:8 par.; Acts 13:24; 19:4.

<sup>54</sup> Getting rid of bodily members (Mark 9:43-48 par.; Matt 5:29-30); carrying one’s cross, losing one’s life, and hating one’s own relatives (Mark 8:34-37 par.; Q / Luke 14:26-27 par.; 17:33 par.; *G. Thom.* 55:1-2; 101:1-3); not serving two masters (Q / Luke 16:13 par.; *G. Thom.* 47); letting the dead bury the dead and not looking back (Q / Luke 9:57-62); counting the cost (Luke 14:28-33).

<sup>55</sup> For the former, Luke 10:13 par.; 11:32 par.; for the latter, Luke 13:1-5; 15:8-10; 16:30.

<sup>56</sup> Acts 2:38, 40; 3:19; 5:31; 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; cf. Luke 24:47.

God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins.... [to declare] that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance” (26:18, 20). According to Acts 8:13-24, the magician Simon, after believing, sought to purchase the power to bestow the Spirit on others. Peter sternly rebuked him, “May your silver perish with you.... Repent ... and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.” According to Acts 15:19, 29; 21:25, one of the few “Jewish” scruples that the Jerusalem leaders (in agreement with delegates from the Antioch church) imposed on gentile believers as a condition of membership was that they should abstain from *porneia* (sexual immorality).<sup>57</sup> If authors of the New Testament viewed repentance as a precondition for conversion and moral renewal as an essential mark of the Christian life, what justification does the contemporary church have for receiving people into the membership of the church without regard to immoral sexual behavior?

The above discussion makes no pretense to being exhaustive. Yet it suffices as a demonstration that faith and behavior consistent with such faith are inseparably intertwined throughout scripture and pertinent to issues of membership and disfellowship. “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead” (Jas 2:26). The credibility of a statement of faith hinges on behavior. Furthermore, although we all sin, not all types of sins or patterns of sinful behavior are equal. The community of God has always regarded some sinful actions as more serious than others. The different penalties for different types of behavior prescribed by Old Testament law is clear testimony to this fact. Not even the antitheses in Matt 5:21-48 require the same level of *church* discipline for all transgressions (e.g., anger and murder, or lust in one’s heart and adultery). There are some forms of sinful behavior that are so harmful to the spiritual health of the community that they require church action in the time preceding the final judgment. Consequently, an appeal to the fact that all believers continue to sin is meaningless as a basis for precluding the excommunication of p/sa-homosexual persons. Where such an appeal has a place is in the manner in which excommunication is practiced: humbly, gently, with great sadness and concern for the offender, only for serious behavioral patterns, and only after giving the offender ample opportunity for repentance. Excommunication is possible because the believing community is not just a community of sinners. As the sphere in which Christ’s status as Lord is realized on earth, it is the community of saints.

B. *Homosexual intercourse is not as bad as some other sins for which people are not denied membership.* Hays argues: “If the church is going to start practicing the discipline of exclusion from the community, there are other issues far more important than homosexuality where we should begin to draw a line in the dirt: violence and materialism, for example.”<sup>58</sup> The argument here is an argument based on consistency. It is a reasonable argument. The church then and now has been a variegated phenomenon

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<sup>57</sup> The prohibition of *porneia*, like the prohibition of idolatry, was not a “Jewish” scruple in the sense that it was a mere ethnic prejudice that gentiles were obliged to respect. Monotheism and sexual morality were central pillars of the Jewish faith which stood in stark contrast to the perceived widespread practices of the pagan world. They therefore required special mention so that gentile converts to Christian faith would not to behave with unrestrained sexual passion (in Paul’s words) “just like the gentiles who do not know God” (1Thess 4:5).

<sup>58</sup> *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 400.

and it is hard to generalize. Notwithstanding this, it is probably safe to say that the first-century church was more willing to hold believers accountable for immoral behavior than most mainline churches today. First-century believers may have been more consistent in the practice of excommunication than we are, giving the exercise of such a right greater credibility than now. We might express concern, however, over how far to take such an argument.

First, is it the case that most mainline churches today would not excommunicate people engaged in *persistent and unrepentant* acts of violence? I doubt, for example, that most churches would entertain membership for known, *unrepentant* serial killers. Domestic-violence awareness has been raised to such a high level over the past two decades that it also seems improbable that most churches would enroll as a member a known, *unrepentant*, serial wife-beater. I confess to not knowing how seriously to take Hays here. Perhaps he is thinking of soldiers (see below) but that strikes me as a dubious exception to the rule. Materialism is more likely to be a case of inconsistency. Yet even here I find it difficult to believe that an *unrepentant* serial con artist, embezzler, thief, or swindler—somebody, for example, who defrauded fellow believers of their life savings and was not sorry for doing so—would be granted membership or would escape excommunication. Yes, the church could do more; for example, threaten with excommunication members engaged in conspicuous cases of greed, such as CEOs who rake in big salaries when employees face layoffs or salary reductions. However, Hays's point seems to me have real merit only if *all* sins of violence and materialism are currently exempted from consideration of membership requirements.

We might also think of examples regarding racism. How many churches would allow a member of the Klu Klux Klan to become, or stay, a member of their church? Would they allow him to come to church dressed in a Klan uniform? Or how many churches would permit a self-affirming Nazi “skinhead” with a swastika tattooed on his arm or forehead to become a member or, if already a member, to remain one? In most cases, the church is willing to withhold or withdraw membership for serious offenders whom secular society also considers to be serious offenders; that is, when it receives a public pat on the back for doing so. It is only in cases where secular society does not consider a given offense to be serious, but scripture and two millennia of church tradition do, that the church becomes reluctant to exercise its responsibilities. In principle the church is not opposed to making behavior an important consideration in membership issues, and in practice the church will make such a connection—but often only if it does not come at the cost of taking a stand against popular trends in society, that is, when courage of conviction is required.

Second, I am not sure how Hays, who after all makes this claim in a book on *New Testament* ethics, can confidently rank homosexual behavior or other forms of sexual immorality behind violence and materialism in a list of important sins. In both Testaments, sexual immorality (including same-sex intercourse) receives the harshest possible condemnation. Unlawful use of violence,<sup>59</sup> massive hoarding of material resources at the expense of the poor, and immoral sexual practices are all regarded as

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<sup>59</sup> As opposed to civil punishment of criminals, for example.

high offenses. There is no text anywhere in the New Testament where violence and materialism are ranked as higher sins than, for example, adultery, incest, fornication, prostitution, and same-sex intercourse. Indeed, a strict line between unlawful sex and materialism is difficult, inasmuch as the Bible can sometimes speak of immoral sexual acts as a theft and the product of greedy lust. Counting up the number of texts that speak about each (a method often pursued by those who argue that materialism is worse than sexual offenses) is a poor method for determining which sins are more serious in ad hoc documents. To assert that violence and materialism are worse than sexual immorality is to confuse contemporary ethical valuations with biblical ones. Even from the vantage point of contemporary ethics absolute statements about homosexual behavior or other immoral sexual practices being less important sins are dubious. Which causes more long-term pain to a spouse: a single act of domestic violence or a single act of marital infidelity? Is the purchase of a Rolls Royce or swindling someone out of some cash worse than committing adultery against one's spouse (a theft of marriage fidelity), fornication (a theft of another's virginity), or same-sex intercourse (a theft of another's divinely-ordained sexual identity)? Given all the societal downsides to same-sex intercourse discussed thus far, there is no point in arguing that violence and materialism are worse than homosexual practice—they are all very serious offenses against God's will.

Third, as noted in the discussion of 1 Corinthians 5, the comparison of homosexual practice on the one hand and violence and materialism on the other may not be fair. Christian murderers and swindlers are probably less likely to be self-affirming (and thus more likely to be open to repentance) than Christians who commit immoral sexual acts, particularly Christians practicing homosexual behavior. It is hard to find contemporary theologies justifying greed, violence, and envy but it is relatively easy to find contemporary theologies promoting various sexual acts and relationships that the Bible treats as immoral. The latter is particularly true of homosexual behavior. Moreover, since all human beings are materialists to one degree or another and since too enjoyment of material possessions is not inherently bad, it is naturally more difficult to draw a line in the sand between acceptable materialists and unacceptable materialists. Thus there are peculiar challenges to disciplining some non-sexual sins that help to explain why they often appear to receive less attention. If one is going to compare the discipline of homosexual practice to the discipline of other sins, the best points of comparison are other sexual sins, such as incest, prostitution, adultery, fornication, and bestiality—and even here only those sexual sins for which there is no repentance. For example, would a p/sa-prostitute or pimp who confessed faith in Christ have any membership problems?

Finally, there seems to be something gravely wrong about arguing that, because the church has been disobedient to God in not exercising fully its responsibility to excommunicate grossly wayward members (violent or materialistic Christians), it should be more consistent in its disobedience (disregarding p/sa homosexual practice for membership requirements). Most of us, if we had to choose between consistent disobedience to God and inconsistent obedience, would choose inconsistent obedience. Is there any virtue to a more consistent transgression of God's will and endangerment of God's holy church? As we noted above, a certain amount of inconsistency in any

implementation of discipline is inevitable. The first-century church recognized this. Matthew cautioned that a zeal for removal of wayward members not get out of hand; otherwise, the wheat would be pulled up with the weeds. Some serious sins have to be left up to God (e.g., sins not easily detected, sins of the heart, sins that are borderline, or sins that are so rampant in a given congregation that damage to the whole church could result from expelling all the offenders). The distinction between Old Testament apodictic law (where punishment is left to God) and casuistic law (where the state imposes a specific penalty) also gets at this point. Paul could have insisted on the excommunication of those Corinthian believers bringing lawsuits against other church members, or of upper-status believers slighting the poor at the Lord's table. Instead, he chose to make his stand at one crucial point: a case of sexual immorality, incest. In our own society, we see petty thieves prosecuted while multi-millionaires hire clever accountants to take advantage of tax loopholes and corporate executives and traders exploit workers for personal gain. There are all sorts of ways in industrial society to steal legally from others. What should be done about such inequities? I know of no one who would scrap the entire penal code until full equity is realized. Should the church be stripped of all its rights to excommunicate members until it can be more consistent in the application of discipline? Or should the church be allowed to continue the exercise of this right while being encouraged toward greater consistency? The latter makes better sense.

C. *The church is not of one mind on the issue.* Hays makes a comparison to his view on the military:

Can a soldier be a Christian? Probably so, but my understanding of the gospel requires me to urge that person to renounce the way of violence.... My theological position on violence is a minority position both in the U.S. church at present and with respect to the church's historic mainstream position. I cannot excommunicate my militarist brothers and sisters and I do not expect them to excommunicate me.... Just as there are serious Christians who in good conscience believe that same-sex erotic activity is consonant with God's will.... I think that both groups are wrong, but in both cases the questions are so difficult that we should receive one another as brothers and sisters in Christ and work toward adjudicating our differences through reflecting together on the witness of Scripture.<sup>60</sup>

Hays's stance against military service is laudable but it is not a good point of comparison with a stance against homosexual behavior.<sup>61</sup> However, his overall point merits serious

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<sup>60</sup> *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 401.

<sup>61</sup> As Hays himself notes, his own position is at odds with "the church's historic mainstream position." His view that homosexual behavior is sinful, however, is not at variance with the church's historic position. Hays's view that military service contradicts Jesus' renunciation of violence is, at best, questionable—particularly in view of the episode of Jesus' cleansing of the temple. The story of his encounter with the centurion at Capernaum (Q / Luke 7:1-10 par.; cf. John 4:46-53) gives no hint of Jesus' distaste for military service. Paul, at least, treated the state's right to "bear the sword" as God-given (Rom 13:1-7). There are no NT vice lists including military personnel among those who by definition shall not inherit God's kingdom. Hays has to extrapolate from one prohibition (the renunciation of violence) to another (the renunciation of *all* violence, including the use of force by the state or personal intervention to save the life of another). The scriptural proscription of homosexual behavior is direct, severe, and unequivocal. Moreover, unlike the case against military service, opposition to homosexual behavior spans both Testaments. The church has to agree to disagree on the question of military service because scripture itself

consideration. The best reason for not imposing the sanction of excommunication on p/sa-homosexual persons may be that there are insufficient votes to do so. Whether the church has the will and integrity to impose such a sanction is unclear to me. The situation varies from denomination to denomination. Many local churches still reserve the right to excommunicate persons who actively and unrepentantly engage in homosexual practice. If in a given denomination or local church support is lacking for excommunicating unrepentant practitioners of same-sex intercourse, then individuals who disagree will either have to live with that situation or leave.

Nevertheless, that is a different scenario from the one Hays is putting forward. Hays's position is that the existence of "serious Christians who in good conscience believe that same-sex erotic activity is consonant with God's will" makes it inappropriate for the church to deny membership to p/sa homosexual persons.<sup>62</sup> What this suggests is that if proponents of any given immoral practice can get a loud enough lobby on their side to support the practice in question, and especially if the elite secular establishment backs them up, then the church should respect their views and not make an issue of it for membership requirements. How far can this logic be taken? The church at Corinth had no intention of expelling the incestuous man, yet Paul insisted anyway that they expel him. If someday a sizeable lobby develops for multiple-partner unions, adult-adolescent sex, prostitution, or anonymous public sex, should the church give up its historic, biblical positions and acknowledge the need to agree to disagree? Over the last few decades increasing numbers of theologians, ethicists, and ordained ministers have accepted the conventional wisdom of the secular elite that sexual intercourse need not be confined to marriage. Shall the church now go the route of Hollywood and cease to call Christian fornicators to repentance? Few of us would like to see this happen yet this is precisely where the logic of Hays's position takes us.

Mormon practitioners of polygamy in the nineteenth century are of all sexual deviants most to be pitied, for their sincerely-held beliefs could have won the day if the Mormon church had just held on for another century. Apparently, they lacked a large enough contingent of "serious Christians who in good conscience believed that polygamous activity is consonant with God's will." Certainly from a biblical perspective, the case for polygamy was significantly stronger then, and hence raised far more "difficult" questions for the church, than the case for same-sex intercourse today. And if the questions are more difficult for polygamy than for homosexuality, then the only conceivable reason why the church today would push for polygamists to be banned and p/sa homosexual

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is unclear. The opposite is the case with regard to homosexual behavior. Even on the contemporary scene, the analogy is flawed. No contemporary church of which I am aware denies ordination *a priori* to members of the military (as the existence of military chaplains shows). Yet most mainline denominations still deny ordination to p/sa homosexual persons, demonstrating the consensus of the church that homosexual behavior is sin (of course, with significant dissenting voices). In short, the military analogy lacks the clarity which the case of homosexual behavior exhibits.

<sup>62</sup> On the surface there appears to be an inconsistency here in Hays's position. Only a couple of paragraphs prior he had stated, "If [homosexual persons] are not welcome, I will have to walk out the door along with them, leaving in the sanctuary only those entitled to cast the first stone." That does not sound like someone who is ready to deny membership to p/sa homosexual persons but has to surrender such an inclination in view of a divided church. He himself does not want to excommunicate p/sa homosexual persons.

persons to be included is that the latter have a powerful lobby and the former do not. Many Christians cringe before the homosexual lobby that persists both in elite secular culture and in the administrative and academic sectors of church society. They are afraid that if they stand up for their belief that homosexual behavior is sin and put some teeth into that belief by refusing church membership to p/sa homosexual persons, they will be culturally marginalized as hateful and bigoted.<sup>63</sup> They say that they are really concerned for homosexually active persons and the health of the church yet nod their heads when they read that Paul demanded expulsion of the incestuous man in order to save his life and preserve the community as the sphere of Christ's lordship. As Hays himself has said, the church's failure to exercise its right to excommunicate immoral members "is often justified in the name of enlightened tolerance of differences, but in fact 'tolerance' can become a euphemism for indifference and lack of moral courage."

The only realistic hope that the church may have for overturning the societal trend in favor of homosexual behavior and thus for preserving its own faithful stand against it is to muster the courage to enforce excommunication of p/sa homosexual persons. Of various forms of sexual immorality (adultery, prostitution, fornication, incest, pedophilia, polygamy), homosexual behavior is virtually the only one with a vigorous political lobby mounting a case for cultural endorsement.<sup>64</sup> A firm stance by the church is necessary to stem the tide in the current "culture war." Not to take such a stance will send a mixed message about how the church feels toward homosexual behavior, especially in the context of a culture which has become increasingly vigorous in its endorsement of homosexual behavior. To many a refusal to excommunicate a p/sa homosexual persons in the church will seem like a compromise stance between scripture and secular culture, a mere interim position between holiness and sin that with time will evolve into ordaining p/sa homosexual persons and, ultimately, outright approval of same-sex intercourse.

Hays talks about "receiving one another as brothers and sisters in Christ." The church should indeed receive as brothers and sisters in Christ those who take a different position on homosexual behavior. The issue is not whether the church should continue to dialogue with those who hold a different viewpoint on this issue but rather whether the church should call to account those actively engaged in self-affirming immoral behavior. Paul was not interested in a collective church dialogue at Corinth with the man committing incest. There was probably little likelihood that reflective dialogue would have convinced the man that, after all, he really did deserve to be expelled if he did not give up the incestuous relationship. Dialogue may be appropriate in situations where a person is contemplating an immoral course of action, not in cases where a person is actively engaged in self-affirming immoral behavior and has no intention of ceasing and desisting. The church, for example, is not in the habit of dialoguing with pedophiles. What was required to promote a change of heart in the incestuous man was a firm and official rejection by the community, making the privilege (not right) of fellowship conditional upon ending a self-affirming attitude toward immoral conduct.

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<sup>63</sup> Acting out of such fear is sin.

<sup>64</sup> Fornication has also received some cultural endorsement but support for it is more diffuse and less organized, politically speaking. NAMBLA lobbies for "man-boy love" but it lacks the clout of other homosexual organizations.

Many people would prefer not to make p/sa homosexual behavior a condition for membership because they say that they are worried about splitting the church. Trying to impose such sanctions, they say, would result in acrimony in numerous local churches and denominations. Hence the compromise: membership, yes; ordination, no. The pursuit of peace and unity in the church is, to be sure, a noble goal deserving of very high priority in the church. However, scripturally and historically, the church has only put such a pursuit above the pursuit of truth and holiness when the point of contention does not involve beliefs or behavior that clearly lead to exclusion from the kingdom of God. When unrepentant, salvation-threatening beliefs or behavior are involved, then a *de facto* split from the sphere of the Spirit's activity is already in the works. To use Paul's words with regard to the matter of circumcision, the persons in question have been "discharged from the employ of Christ" (Gal 5:4). In order to preserve the sanctity of the community and avoid the judgment of God, the community must pull itself away from the offending members (1 Cor 5:6-13). Thus, in a letter renowned for its stress on church unity (1 Corinthians), Paul insists on the expulsion of a sexually immoral member. The author of Ephesians called on believers to "maintain the [sevenfold] unity (oneness) of the Spirit in the bond of peace: one body and one spirit, just as you were called in the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (4:3-6). In spite of such an exhortation, the same author could then go on to urge his readers not to be "blown around by every wind of doctrine" (4:14), insist that they "no longer live like the gentiles live," who "hand themselves over to licentiousness" (4:17-19), and require that "no sexual immorality...be even named among you," because "no sexually immoral person...has an inheritance in the kingdom of God" (5:3-5). Believers should even "disassociate" from sexually immoral persons, "for you were once darkness, but now light in the Lord; live as children of light" (5:7). To do otherwise is to make a god of church unity and peace, and to sacrifice on its altar holiness and truth, indeed the very Holy Spirit that makes the church the assembly of God and body of Christ. Obviously, then, appeals to church unity in the case of p/sa homosexuality, based on Eph 4:3-6, are misplaced. The same can be said for any appeals based on the Johannine Jesus' great prayer for church unity in John 17. For that prayer includes petitions that God "make them holy by means of the truth," that is, through obedience to the very "word" which makes them "not of this world" and thus hated by the world (17:14-19). Tolerance of unrepentant, immoral behavior endangers that very holiness by accommodating the church to the evil practices of the world. Jesus chose the church to "go and bear fruit," to "keep my commandments," even if doing so incurs the hatred of the world—and indeed it will (16:8-27). Those who do not bear such fruit are to be "thrown out" (15:6).

When does the forgiveness/love of the church enter the picture? It does so when those engaged in salvation-threatening immoral activity are admonished in a spirit of gentleness and humility, rather than allowing them to lead self-deceived lives that terminate in destruction. It continues to appear when ample opportunity is given for repentance and when repentance is received with swift and enthusiastic reintegration. It manifests itself when counseling and moral support are extended and subsequent stumbles are patiently met with further opportunities for repentance and restoration. Expulsion of practicing, persistently unrepentant participants in immoral behavior is itself



to be conceived as an act of anguished love. It is not a death sentence, but a denial of ongoing fellowship in the hopes of retrieving the wrongdoer for God, an event over which the community takes no satisfaction but rather mourns. Even when that retrieval does not take place, excommunication demonstrates love for the body of Christ as a whole by showing concern for the ongoing sanctity of the community before God.

D. *Many p/sa homosexual Christians exhibit the presence of the Spirit in their lives.* Soards makes this point:

Many of the arguments from experience for the approval of homosexuality cite the clear, real evidences of God's grace in the lives of homosexuals. While such arguments do not prove the appropriateness of homosexual behavior, they do testify to the reality of grace in particular lives.<sup>65</sup>

As with the other arguments addressed thus far, one wonders: did such a point not occur to first-century churches? Can such an argument not be used to justify acceptance of every sort of sexually immoral behavior imaginable? I know people who have worked in prisons as counselors to sex offenders. They tell me that many of the latter, including pedophiles, come across as remarkably nice, caring, and sensitive people. Sex offenders do not howl when there is a full moon. Some showed great responsibility in their jobs and were known as good family people before they got caught. Some were Sunday School teachers or even pastors. Probably the incestuous man at Corinth showed evidence of God's grace in his life. Paul seems to have assumed that the man was a genuine Christian because he expresses the hope that disassociation will lead to the man's spirit being saved in the day of the Lord (5:5). When Paul expresses himself generally about immoral Christians with whom the church should cut off association, he uses the more ambiguous description "anyone calling himself a brother" (5:11). Matt 18:15-20 refers to a sinning "brother." 2 Thess 3:15 explicitly commands the church at Thessalonica not to look upon anyone in the community who are extorting food and with whom the church should disassociate as an "enemy" but rather as a "brother." The fact that the expelled members Hymenaeus and Alexander are said to "have made shipwreck of their faith" suggests that they too were genuine believers, at least at some time in their past (1 Tim 1:20).

Consequently, some p/sa homosexual persons who call themselves Christians, like some p/sa-adulterers or fornicators, probably are genuine Christians indwelt by the Holy Spirit. But whether they are or are not is not the issue. The issues are: Is this person grieving the Holy Spirit by his/her conduct? Does this person stand a good chance of being denied entrance into God's kingdom if the immoral behavior persists? And does the church, by failing to expel the member, compromise the holiness of God's people and risk incurring God's wrath? The scriptural answer to all these questions is, clearly, yes. Fortunately, the church does not have to carry the burden of discerning precisely which p/sa homosexual persons are real Christians, at least not in the case of those who were enrolled in the church before immoral behavior was manifested. However, in the case of people who are known to be actively and self-affirmingly engaged in homosexual

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<sup>65</sup> *Scripture and Homosexuality*, 75-76.

practice at the time membership in the church is first sought, the church has a responsibility to discern the genuineness of a confession of faith, and behavior cannot be divorced from such an assessment. Naturally, the church is not looking for perfection but rather a willingness to obey Christ. If the church shirks this responsibility, then logically it has no right to refuse membership to admit any p/sa-serial killer, thief, or pedophile into membership who confesses Christ as Lord.

E. *The church is more likely to transform the sexual behavior of p/sa homosexual persons if it keeps them in the church rather than kicks them out.* This is a point that Grenz emphasizes: “The church can only assist people to overcome sin and live in obedience to God if they receive the ministry of, and perhaps even participate in, the believing community. This is as true for gays and lesbians as for anyone else.”<sup>66</sup> No one can deny that in some cases this statement may hold true for the category of homosexual persons in general. Nevertheless, the cases where it is least likely to apply are precisely those cases where persons who engage in homosexual practice are persistently unrepentant; in other words, those cases that the scriptural practice of excommunication most has in view. An analogy in the field of marriage counseling would be the false assumption that a person is most likely to change the habits of his/her spouse after, rather than before, the wedding day. For many people security is a deterrent to change. The less that is at stake in committing offensive behavior, the less incentive there may be for abstaining from such behavior. In the case of homosexuality, it permits an aggressive flaunting of homosexual behavior in the church. In effect, “we’re here, we’re queer, and you better like it.” If membership is not at stake, why not show erotic affection to one’s same-sex lover in church (e.g., kiss, caress, hold hands, hold by the waist). After all, if homosexual behavior cannot get you kicked out of the church, why not push the envelope? People who scoff at such a scenario have not carefully followed gay-rights tactics. The church can be held hostage to flagrant demonstrations of sin, assaulting the moral consciousness of members and causing weaker members to stumble.

If Grenz’s argument has merit, then it would effectively eliminate excommunication as a right/rite of the church, no matter how grievous the pattern of immoral behavior and no matter how self-deluded the wrongdoer. If change of the offender is the sole goal, then the church would always be compelled to go with the odds (as Grenz sees it) and continue association. Apparently, not even Grenz follows his reasoning in all cases because his discussion of membership is restricted to homosexual persons in *stable* same-sex erotic relationships (ironically, a category of homosexual persons that may well be the least receptive to change through continued membership in a church).

Moreover, Paul, Matthew, and other NT authors must have made a mistake in recommending disassociation in specific cases. Paul should have kept the incestuous man in the community. He was misguided in thinking that excommunication was the best hope for the man’s redemption. One could retort that this particular case was exceptional, inasmuch as the community at Corinth failed to challenge the offender. Yet even before this situation developed, Paul had written to the community encouraging them not to associate with an array of Christians who engaged in p/sa-immoral behavior

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<sup>66</sup> *Welcoming But Not Affirming*, 133.

(5:9-11). That suggests that his instruction to excommunicate was not tailored only to situations in which a community abdicates its responsibility to exhort and admonish. The fact that the lists of expellable offenders cited in 5:10-11 were shaped by Deuteronomic law also supports the contention that the instance of excommunication in 1 Corinthians 5 has general application.

This leads into another flaw in Grenz's reasoning: the assumption that the only, or even primary, concern of excommunication is the transformation of the wrongdoer. The primary concern in 1 Corinthians 5 is that the church, by allowing the unrepentant wrongdoer to remain, might compromise its own corporate holiness and provoke God to judgment. Allowing an unrepentant Christian who commits serious moral offenses to remain indefinitely in fellowship with other believers can have a negative impact on the moral resolve of other members to live holy, transformed lives in obedience to the commands of God. We have witnessed this development in the contemporary church. In the last few decades, inconsistent enforcement of church discipline in matters of sexual behavior has helped diminish the church's resolve to resist the cultural encroachments of pre-marital sex, divorce, adultery, and abortion. This in turn helped pave the way for the church's current confusion over the homosexuality issue. Making membership a non-issue for p/sa homosexual persons has eroded and will continue to erode ecclesiastical opposition to same-sex intercourse. Grenz thinks keeping p/sa homosexual persons in the church will increase the chances of their reform. We have good reason to doubt that, based on scripture's embrace of excommunication in certain cases. Yet, even if Grenz were right, keeping p/sa homosexual persons in the church indefinitely would also markedly increase the risk that the church, not those in persistent homosexual activity, will end up changing its thinking about homosexual behavior.

Grenz's argument has validity if one applies it to attending non-members rather than members. P/sa-homosexual persons, like all other p/sa sinners, ought to be welcomed into the church as non-members, in the hope that the gospel might impact their behavior. Sufficient time needs to be given for the proclamation of the word, the love of the saints, and the stirrings of the Holy Spirit to do their work. In this way, the church can fulfill its duty to be "the light of the world" and "a city built on a hill" without muddying its own shining example of the transforming grace of God.

F. *P/sa homosexual persons make a valuable contribution to the church; the church would suffer from their absence.* In a context separate from the issue of membership, Hays notes that "The homosexual Christians in our midst may teach us something about our true condition as people living between the cross and the final redemption of our bodies."<sup>67</sup> Grenz, citing this line, comments: "homosexual persons have an important contribution to make to the life of the community.... Consequently, the church and its ministry are poorer if it ostracizes homosexual believers."<sup>68</sup> We can say an emphatic "amen" to these observations, albeit with a qualification. The church *is* poorer for their absence. That is partly why the church conducts any excommunication in a spirit of mourning (1 Cor 5:2). Cutting off a part of the body of Christ, even amidst a prayerful

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<sup>67</sup> *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 403.

<sup>68</sup> *Welcoming But Not Affirming*, 133.

hope of reattachment, is always a dreadful affair. “If one [bodily] member suffers, all the members suffer along with it” (1 Cor 12:26).

The potential danger in this argument by Hays and Grenz is that of thinking of p/sa-homosexual persons in isolation from other p/sa sinners. It is not only p/sa homosexual persons who have a lot to offer the church. The same could be said for any of the categories of immoral people from whom Paul instructed the Corinthians to disassociate. It was true of the incestuous man, for example. However, whatever other positive contributions the incestuous man made, or could have made, to the Corinthian church were dwarfed by the magnitude of his immoral conduct. It follows, then, that there are situations when the positive contribution that a believer makes to a church is outweighed by the harm of continuing fellowship. To quote Hays again, an infinitely nonjudgmental and inclusive posture on the church’s part “allows terrible cancerous abuses to continue unchecked in the community. Do we not know that a little cancer corrupts the whole body? Surgery is necessary; clean out the cancer so that the body may be whole.” The kind of persons with same-sex attractions whose homosexuality can be a help to the church are those who struggle against homoerotic desires, abstain from same-sex intercourse, repent when they stumble, and yearn for the day when a transformed body will end the struggle once and for all—in other words, those homosexual persons who are not practicing and self-affirming. P/sa homosexual persons do provide an example to the church but it is a negative example, an example of hard-hearted and foolish disobedience to God’s word. The church that tolerates such unrepentant behavior only compounds the negative example by tacitly communicating the message that the church should not take too seriously univocal and strong biblical prohibitions of immoral behavior. The church is “poorer” if it ostracizes p/sa homosexual believers but it is “poorest” when it ignores the scripture’s advice to disassociate from the same.

*G. Excommunicating p/sa homosexual persons is impractical because it is unenforceable.* A possible argument against excommunicating p/sa homosexual persons—one not raised by Soards, Hays, or Grenz, but by others—is that it cannot be implemented in practice. First, the church has little way of finding out who is engaged in immoral sexual behavior. The complexities of people’s intimate sexual lives are not normally a part of community discussions at coffee hour. It is problematic at best to presume that the church should and can know about what others do in their bedrooms. We should all be worried about granting the church such intrusive power into our private lives. Nobody wants a reign of terror. Second, in nearly all cases, disciplinary action will be a moot point anyway since most p/sa-homosexual persons will of their own accord gravitate to churches that clearly affirm their behavior. Even if the matter ever came to the point of expulsion, the individual in question would likely join another church. We face problems of implementation that the first-century churches did not face. At that time there would usually have been only one main Christian church in a given city (though at both Corinth and Rome we read of several house churches, and a large city like Antioch may have had several independent Christian gatherings). A first-century believer expelled from such a church would have nowhere else (or few other places) to go, making expulsion in such cases a more meaningful event. In addition, religion also probably played a more significant role in the lives of people then than it does today.

This argument raises legitimate concerns. At the same time it overstates the case. The very use of such an argument in an attempt to forestall p/sa homosexual persons from being excommunicated is proof against its validity. If excommunication is impractical and unenforceable, then there is little need to worry that it will have a significant negative impact on p/sa homosexual Christians. But people who support the right of p/sa homosexual Christians to be members of the church thwart attempts to subject the latter to excommunication precisely because they fear a significant negative impact. On this score, people cannot have their cake and eat it too: either excommunication is practical and enforceable, in which case supporters of same-sex intercourse have good reason to want to deny the church the right; or it is impractical and unenforceable, in which case there is no need to worry about giving the church the right. The truth is that, while the impact excommunication has today is diminished relative to the first century, it is still great enough to send a powerful message about the church's disapproval of homosexual behavior. Obviously, a denomination-wide policy that mandated the denial or withdrawal of membership to any unrepentant persons engaging in immoral sexual behavior would have a greater impact than a policy applicable only to individual local churches. Yet even the latter would help because it would allow a local assembly to maintain scriptural standards of morality among its own members. To be sure, those denied membership or expelled for p/sa-immorality have more options for fellowship elsewhere than their first-century counterparts. Nevertheless, church action would still retain some of the effect of a wake-up call. But regardless of the effect on the wrongdoer, the "leavening" effect of sin on that particular church would be nullified—which, after all, was Paul's primary concern in 1 Corinthians 5.

On the matter of intrusion into the private lives of people, the real threat of intrusion is the risk of p/sa homosexual members flaunting their sinful behavior in the presence of the congregation—for example, speaking freely and affirmingly of their homosexual relationships, introducing their lovers as lovers, displaying homosexual affections at church (hand-holding, etc.), and in general making a political statement (whether intentional or not) about the "normality" of same-sex erotic love. The church has always recognized the limitations of its power to disassociate from immoral members (see above). If the church becomes too intrusive, it threatens to pull the wheat with the weeds. Excommunication prevents, though, the kind of scenario that took place in 1 Corinthians 5: a man who flaunted his immoral sexual behavior before the church and expected to get away with it. Sure, there will always be people who are able to keep grossly immoral behavior hidden from the scrutiny of fellow believers. A churchgoing man may cheat on his wife for years without anyone in the church knowing about it. There is nothing the church can do about that. However, if a church member catches the man in a bar kissing another woman, or if a jilted lover comes forward with allegations, the church can hardly ignore this. If the man remains unrepentant even after ample confrontation by the church, then the church has reasonable grounds for going ahead with disassociation.

There is also a middle way between snooping around for dirt on other people and adopting a "don't ask, don't tell" policy (as prevails in the military today). The latter is a sham, in that it encourages a climate of denial on the part of those who have strong

circumstantial evidence that a person is a p/sa homosexual, rewards homosexual persons who practice intentional deceit, and shows complete disinterest in reform. The church has to be interested in the moral conduct of its members if it is to be something other than just a club for socializing. If the church has good reason to suspect immoral behavior on the part of any of its members, it has a moral duty to confront such a person in a loving and gentle manner. Those doing the confronting should do so mindful of their own moral failings. Anything else amounts to an abuse of power. The primary goal is the moral health of the church, an important piece of which is secure (if at all possible) the repentance and transformation of the wrongdoer. There is a difference between humiliating people and helping them to feel healthy shame at their immoral behavior (2 Thess 3:14: “discontinue associating with him, in order that he may feel ashamed”).<sup>69</sup>

The above critique of seven reasons for not denying membership to p/sa homosexual persons should in no way be construed as questioning the courage or compassion of the authors with whom I am in dialogue or the quality of their work on homosexuality. Each of them has taken great risks and rendered an invaluable service to the scholarly and ecclesiastical debate. However, their view on church membership for p/sa homosexual persons is contradicted by their own arguments against homosexual behavior and by their own sincere commitment to the authority of scripture. Implicitly, they are acknowledging that *either* p/sa homosexual practice is not as serious a transgression of Christian morality as scripture and nearly two millennia of church tradition has said that it is; *or*, though such behavior is as serious as scripture says, the church no longer has the right to consider gross, unrepentant immorality as grounds for withholding or retracting membership in the church. The former paves the way for the church’s eventual acceptance of homosexual behavior, the ordination of p/sa homosexual persons, a diminished ecclesiastical stance against sexual immorality generally, and a significant devaluation of the authority of scripture on ethical issues to which it speaks clearly, firmly, and consistently. The latter view undermines the historic connection between faith and transformed behavior. It goes beyond the church’s classic recognition of Christian moral behavior as unmeritorious and as part of an ongoing process of sanctification. It sends the message that transformed behavior is not at all a necessary corollary of the Christian confession of Christ as Lord, however minimal the church’s expectation for transformation. The moral standards of God and church can be mocked with impunity by the immoral conduct of impenitent members and the church can at most only deny ordained office. This view also unwittingly promotes a distorted perception of

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<sup>69</sup> In today’s litigious society, one might add an eighth argument against excommunicating p/sa-homosexual persons: the threat of lawsuits. As Craig Blomberg notes, “judges and juries are all too eager to award substantial sums of money to individuals who sue their former churches, often leaving those congregations in severe financial straits.” The solution is not to cower before secular authorities and allow outsiders to determine moral policy in the church. But the church does have to take appropriate precautions. “Constitutions or bylaws must clearly state the procedures of discipline, potential members must read and agree to them, a condition for membership may include signing forms waiving the right to sue the church, and then the congregation must carefully and consistently implement its policies. The laws in any given state must be carefully studied and followed to determine clergy’s privileges of confidentiality as well as their responsibilities to disclose illegal behavior to local authorities” (*1 Corinthians* [NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995] 112; cf. also the literature on contemporary church discipline cited on pp. 111-12).

excommunication for immoral behavior as inherently unloving and detrimental to the unity of the church.

## **V. Conclusions Regarding Church Membership**

Where does all this leave us on the question of contemporary application of membership requirements for homosexual persons? Homosexual persons who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and who do not engage in same-sex intercourse should be allowed to become, or to remain, members in the church. Within the context of membership, the church will want to provide close support to homosexual members, encouraging them to “take every thought captive for obedience to Christ” (2 Cor 10:5), to recognize homoerotic impulses as sinful impulses, and to struggle faithfully against such impulses. In essence, the church should treat such persons like heterosexual members who struggle with lust, pornography, or other sexual sins short of non-marital intercourse. Some additional care and concern may need to be exercised toward homosexual persons in view of the fact that such, unlike heterosexuals, cannot as easily be channeled into long-term, monogamous relationships with the opposite sex. Moreover, many homosexual persons have to deal with anger and resentment over unjust and unloving treatment by some opponents of same-sex intercourse, requiring on the church’s part special sensitivity, humility, and compassion. Naturally, the particular ways in which the love of church members/leaders should be manifested to homosexual members will vary somewhat, depending on whether the latter try to justify in their own minds homoerotic thoughts and desires (therapeutic counseling, quiet and patient understanding, soothing words, or firm admonition). If the church is incapable of providing appropriate counseling, it should be able to make referrals to trained Christian counselors and ex-gay ministries. The goal of helping the homosexual Christian to develop a heterosexual orientation can only be a hope—to be sure, a realistic hope. The goal of helping the homosexual Christian to develop healthy non-sexual relationships with people of the same and opposite sex, and to abstain from same-sex intercourse, is doable. Perhaps above all, the church should treat the homosexual person as a whole person, as a person who has needs and concerns beyond those that have to do with same-sex orientation. This obviously includes homosexual persons who have HIV/AIDS.

When a homosexual person who is currently involved in an erotic relationship with a person of the same sex wants to become a member of a local church, membership should be made conditional upon abandoning all same-sex erotic relationships. Otherwise, the church tacitly gives up any future right to excommunicate that member for continuing in same-sex relationships. Yet an initial denial of membership is not the same thing as immediate disassociation. A p/sa homosexual person can be welcomed in the church without granting membership status. The precedent of Jesus eating with “sinners” should warn the church against isolating itself from the world. If the church does not allow itself to come into contact with the unredeemed world, then the church has little hope of impacting society and individuals for positive change. The distinctiveness of Jesus’ outreach to sinners lay not in his condoning of sin (which he did not do) but in his aggressive outreach and degree of intimacy with sinners (table fellowship and other

social contact) and in his joyous welcoming of *repentant* sinners back into the fold of God's people (without compensatory penalty). Paul himself made clear to the church at Corinth that he was not requiring them to disassociate from immoral *unbelievers* "since you would in that case need to go out of the world" (1 Cor 5:9-10). A p/sa homosexual person walking through church doors for the first time (or many times thereafter) should certainly not be turned away. Immediate reformation cannot be expected. Without an appealing presentation of love and the Spirit's power, there will be little reason for such an individual to change. Time must be given for the Spirit to work on the heart and mind of the homosexual person within the supportive embrace of God's people. How much time will depend on a number of factors. Does the person flaunt his/her homosexual identity? Is s/he showing signs of receptivity to the church's moral stance against homosexual behavior? Or is s/he beginning to interpret the church's tolerance as approval? Is the church's own opposition to same-sex intercourse being eroded? Answers may also vary according to the degree to which a church is "seeker-oriented" or the level of interpersonal accountability among members. The church guided by the Spirit, and not the p/sa homosexual person, should control the process.

When a member is discovered to be a p/sa homosexual (or adulterer, fornicator, etc.), the church must give the person three opportunities to repent: the first time in a private meeting between the accused and accuser (or, possibly, an elder or pastor); the second time, with one or two additional witnesses present; and the third time before the whole church (Matt 18:15-17). Scripture does not indicate the precise length of time over which the process takes place, but the likely sense of Matt 18:15-17, coupled with other texts that refer to disassociation, suggests a time of fairly limited duration. If repentance follows at any one of the three stages, the church should be swift to extend forgiveness and comfort and to reaffirm its love for the penitent wrongdoer (2 Cor 2:5-11). The same holds true for *nearly unlimited relapses, so long as each relapse is followed by a sincere confession of repentance*. In doing so, the church demonstrates a generous spirit of compassion and forgiveness. Only a willful and persistent rejection of the church's admonition can result in withdrawal of membership and association. If the member refuses repentance at every stage, then it becomes evident that s/he has made a deliberate choice to maintain a set of values and a lifestyle that are diametrically opposed to those of the church and the God of Jesus Christ. As such, s/he forfeits the privilege of partnership in the work of the gospel. The church then, in a state of deep mourning, ratifies what has already happened in reality: a parting of the ways between the wrongdoer and the church. Even if the p/sa homosexual person leaves voluntarily, a formal excommunication may still be necessary in order to give the church an opportunity to process and discuss what has happened, to educate the church on the reasons for taking a stance against immorality, to stigmatize officially the behavior in question for both the offender and other members of the church, and to make it clear to members of the church that they are to end all familial association with the immoral person.<sup>70</sup> Far from being

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<sup>70</sup> Craig Blomberg suggests that the disassociation need not be total. Reflecting on the connection of Matt 18:17 to 1 Cor 5:5 (the rehabilitative purpose of discipline), he writes: "The Christian equivalent [to 'a pagan and a tax collector'] would seem to be to treat an excommunicant as an unbeliever (while not claiming that he or she necessarily is). In other words, such people should not be permitted to take the Lord's Supper or participate in any other Christian gatherings that are reserved for believers only. But they



cruel, excommunication by the church is loving when it is properly conceived and carried out. The church is concerned about something more important than the hurt feelings of an excommunicated member. It is concerned with the person's salvation and transformation into God's image. The church's act of exclusion forewarns the offender of a much worse exclusion to come if repentance does not follow: exclusion from the abode of God. And the church in taking such steps acts with the approval and support of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ in their midst (Matt 18:18-20; 1 Cor 5:4). Should the offender subsequently repent of the behavior in question, reintegration into the community ought once more to be swift and joyous.

As 1 Corinthians 5 and Matthew 18 show, the goals of excommunication are threefold: (1) honoring and fearing God's opposition to immoral behavior (not mocking God or provoking God to wrath by defiling God's holy Spirit and dishonoring God's name in the world); (2) protecting the moral health of the church (guarding against both immorality and self-righteousness); and (3) acting for the ultimate salvation of the offender.<sup>71</sup> When in doubt about implementing discipline, the church should always err

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presumably could be allowed to sit in a service in which unbelievers are welcome, so long as they are not treated as if nothing had happened. Friends and fellow church members should continue to reach out and urge repentance just as they do in evangelizing non-Christians. But intimate social intercourse cannot continue unchanged. Interpersonal relationships will inevitably be strained so long as the individual refuses to acknowledge any wrongdoing" (1 Corinthians, 108). The wording of 1 Corinthians 5 suggests, though, that attendance at the community gatherings would not be permitted, even though "outsiders and unbelievers" were sometimes present at such meetings (1 Cor 14:23-24). Paul stated that the incestuous man should already have been "removed from your midst" (5:2); that he should now be "handed over to Satan" (5:5); that the "old leaven" should be "cleaned out" (5:7); that the Corinthian believers should not "associate" (lit., "mix again together") with him (5:9, 11), "not even eat with such a one" (5:11); that he should be "removed from amongst yourselves" (5:13). The eating may refer exclusively to community celebrations of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34), but the context suggests a prohibition of socializing at all meal times. The expelled member is placed by Paul in a distinct category. The former calls himself a believer but believers are not permitted to associate with him as they would with other believers. He is classified as a "sexually immoral person" ( *pornos* ) but believers are not permitted to associate with him as they would with the immoral persons of the world (5:9-13). In short, he is in a liminal state. He is neither a moral "insider" ( *ho esō* , "the one inside") nor an immoral "outsider" ( *ho exō* , "the one outside"). He is an immoral "insider" and, as such, special rules for non-association apply that exclude the offender even from the kinds of associations that would be permitted with unbelievers. In later early-Christian texts one can see the especially negative place occupied by immoral or apostate believers in the eyes of the church (cf. 2 Pet 2:20-21, cited above; also, the denial of a "second repentance" in Heb 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 1 John 5:16-17). According to Josephus, members of the Qumran sect that were expelled from the order for "committing grave faults" faced a desperate existence. "The individual thus excluded often perishes...; for bound by his oaths and customs he cannot even share the food of others. Reduced to eating grass, he perishes, his body dried up by hunger. They have also out of compassion taken back many who were at their last gasp, judging this torture to death sufficient for the expiation of their faults" ( *War*  2.143-44). In later rabbinic texts even those subjected to a merely temporary ban were kept at a spatial distance (Forkman,  *Limits of the Religious Community* , 101). One can be reasonably certain that by "removal" Paul meant complete exclusion from community gatherings and all meals. Less certain, but still likely, exclusion entailed the avoidance of any contact, at least contact that did not arise for the express purpose of persuading the offender to repent.

<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Calvin: "In such corrections and excommunication, the church has  *three ends in view* .  *The first is that they who lead a filthy and infamous life may not be called Christians, to the dishonor of God* , as if his holy church were a conspiracy of wicked and abandoned men. For since the church itself is the body of Christ, it cannot be corrupted by such foul and decaying members without some disgrace falling upon its

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Head.... And here also we must preserve the order of the Lord's Supper, that it may not be profaned by being administered indiscriminately.... *The second purpose is that the good be not corrupted by the constant company of the wicked*, as commonly happens. For (such is our tendency to wander from the way) there is nothing easier than for us to be led away by bad examples from right living.... *The third purpose is that those overcome by shame for their baseness begin to repent*. They who under gentler treatment would have become more stubborn so profit by the chastisement of their own evil as to be awakened when they feel the rod" (*Institutes* 4.12.5; trans. F. L. Battles; emphases mine). The whole of book IV, chap. 12 provides an excellent discussion of church discipline. For example (again, emphases mine):

"But because some persons, in their hatred of discipline, recoil from its very name, let them understand this: if no society, indeed, no house which has even a small family, can be kept in proper condition without discipline, it is much more necessary in the church, whose condition should be as ordered as possible.... Therefore, *all who desire to remove discipline or to hinder its restoration...are surely contributing to the ultimate dissolution of the church*" (1).

"[S]ome [sins] are faults; others, crimes or shameful acts. To correct these latter ones, we must not only use admonition or rebuke, but a severer remedy: as Paul shows [in 1 Cor 5:3-5].... Therefore, in excluding from its fellowship manifest adulterers, fornicators, thieves, robbers, seditious persons, perjurers, false witnesses, and the rest of this sort, as well as the insolent..., the church claims for itself nothing unreasonable but practices the jurisdiction conferred upon it by the Lord. Now, *that no one may despise such a judgment of the church* or regard condemnation by vote of the believers as a trivial thing, *the Lord has testified that this is nothing but the publication of his own sentence*, and what they have done on earth is ratified in heaven.... Those who trust that without this bond of discipline the church can long stand here, I say, mistaken; unless, perhaps, we can with impunity go without that aid which the Lord foresaw would be necessary for us" (4).

"For *such great severity* [viz., excommunication] *is not to be used in lighter sins*, but verbal chastisement is enough—and that mild and fatherly—which should not harden or confuse the sinner, but bring him back to himself, that he may rejoice rather than be sad that he has been corrected. *But shameful acts need to be chastised with a harsher remedy.... he ought for a time to be deprived of the communion of the Supper until he gives assurance of his repentance*. For Paul not only rebuked the [incestuous] Corinthian in words but banished him from the church, and chided the Corinthians for bearing with him so long" (6).

"*It is, therefore, not our task to erase from the number of the elect those who have been expelled from the church, or to despair as if they were already lost*. It is lawful to regard them as estranged from the church, and thus, from Christ—but only for such time as they remain separated.... *we should still commend them to the Lord's judgment, hoping for better things of them in the future than we see in the present*. Nor should we...cease to call upon God in their behalf. And (to put it in one word) *let us not condemn to death the very person who is in the hand and judgment of God alone; rather, let us only judge of the character of each man's works by the law of the Lord*. While we follow this rule, we rather take our stand upon the divine judgment than put forward our own. Let us not claim for ourselves more license in judgment, unless we wish to limit God's power and confine his mercy by law" (9).

"...Christ...limits the force of binding to ecclesiastical censure. By this *those who are excommunicated are not cast into everlasting ruin and damnation, but in hearing that their life and morals are condemned, they are assured of their everlasting condemnation unless they repent*. Excommunication differs from *anathema* in that the latter, taking away all pardon, condemns and consigns a man to eternal destruction; the former, rather, avenges and chastens his moral conduct. And although excommunication also punishes the man, it does so in such a way that, by forewarning him of his future condemnation, it may call him back to salvation. But if that be obtained, reconciliation and restoration to communion await him. Moreover, *anathema* is very rarely or never used. Accordingly, *though ecclesiastical discipline does not permit us to live familiarly or have intimate contact with excommunicated persons, we ought nevertheless to strive by whatever means we can in order that they may turn to a more virtuous life and may return to the society and unity of the church.... Unless this gentleness is maintained in both private and public censures, there is danger lest we soon slide down from discipline to butchery*" (10).

"...Augustine argues against the Donatists: that individual laymen, if they see vices not diligently enough corrected by the council of elders, should not therefore at once depart from the church.... And Augustine does not hide the fact that *he who neglects to warn, reprove, and correct evil men, even though*

on the side of a gentleness and patience, without shirking altogether its clear responsibilities to God and the rest of the community.

As a final addendum to the discussion of church membership for p/sa homosexual persons, I have been referring throughout to excommunication and to withdrawal of membership as the same thing. One could argue, perhaps with some justification, that an equally faithful interpretation of scripture would distinguish between banishing a member from church gatherings (an essential part of excommunication) and withdrawing membership altogether. It depends what membership means for any given denomination or independent local church. If membership entitles a person to certain rights and privileges that would be incompatible with exclusion from the life of the church, then an expelled member of a church would at the very least need to fall in a distinct subcategory of membership (estranged members?) or have his/her membership temporarily suspended, pending repentance. In the case of offending members (as opposed to immoral persons seeking membership), the primary issue is not membership per se but exclusion from the life of the church.

## VI. Ordination

In some respects, homosexual persons seeking ordained office should be treated in the same way as homosexual persons seeking membership. On the one hand, if p/sa-homosexual persons should not become or indefinitely remain members of the church, it goes without saying that they should be denied ordination or, if already ordained, have their ordination revoked, until such time as repentance is forthcoming. On the other hand, a non-p/sa homosexual Christian should have as much of an opportunity to be a member or ordained minister as any other Christian. If anything, a Christian who has experienced victory in Christ over homosexual impulses should have a greater opportunity than most to be ordained, because such a person epitomizes what the gospel is all about (death to sin, life for God) and can exercise a wonderful ministry to others seeking to abandon homosexual behavior.

However, with respect to unrepentant or self-affirming homosexual persons, the policy on ordaining to ministry should differ at points from the policy concerning membership. A non-practicing but self-affirming homosexual person who believes in Christ should be accepted as a member, because the act of same-sex intercourse itself, not the thought, constitutes grounds for revoking membership.<sup>72</sup> Yet should a non-practicing

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*he does not favor them or sin with them, is guilty before the Lord*' (11).

"Augustine especially commends this one thing: if the contagion of sin invades the multitude, the severe mercy of a vigorous discipline is necessary.... For, writing to Aurelius, bishop of Carthage, he complains that drunkenness (so severely condemned in Scripture) is raging unpunished in Africa.... He then adds: 'These things, in my judgment, are removed not roughly or harshly, or in any imperious manner; and more by teaching than by commanding, more by monishing than by menacing. For so we must deal with a great number of sinners. But we are to use severity toward the sins of a few' " (13).

<sup>72</sup> The church might have grounds for withholding or withdrawing membership from a self-affirming, non-practicing homosexual Christian if the latter becomes vocally or behaviorally disruptive in clamoring for approval of same-sex intercourse during church meetings. But then the issue for exclusion would be more

but self-affirming homosexual Christian be prohibited from being ordained? Although heterosexual Christians who support homosexual practice for others can be ordained, only homosexual Christians who adopt the same stance are at high risk of actually engaging in homosexual behavior. A more clear-cut difference between membership and ordination of p/sa homosexual persons is that repentance can have only limited efficacy as regards restoration to ordained office. As far as membership is concerned, a person who experiences intense same-sex attractions can have an extraordinary number of relapses into homosexual behavior and still remain a member if he is penitent on each occasion. As far as ordained office is concerned, it creates serious problems for the church to allow a homosexual person with several relapses to remain in office, regardless of accompanying repentance. The same, of course, could be said of a minister who has had several adulterous affairs or has committed several acts of incest. Moreover, where restoration should be swift in the case of members, it seems best for the believing community that restoration of ministers, elders, deacons, and others in ordained office entail a period of probation. The purpose of such probation would be to give the church some assurance that relapses will not continue. There are other differences in the way discipline should be carried out (below). The reason for these differences between membership and ordained office is simple: those in ordained office serve as role models to the community and are therefore called to a higher standard of faithfulness to the demands of the gospel on moral life. Ordained officeholders can hardly urge members of the church “to keep all that [Jesus] commanded” (Matt 28:20), including abstention from sexual immorality, when the former are violating the very same commandments.

Thus, in the Pastoral Epistles, we find in the discussion of qualifications for church office a strong concern for impeccable moral character. Overseers/bishops must be “above reproach (*anepilēmpton*),<sup>73</sup> a husband of one woman/wife,<sup>74</sup> ... managing his own household well... . If any does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of the church of God?” (1 Tim 3:2, 4). Essentially the same qualifications are prescribed for deacons/helpers and presbyters/elders (1 Tim 3:8, 10, 12; Tit 1:5-6). The requirements of “one wife” and an ordered household presuppose sexual fidelity in a lifelong heterosexual union (cf. Tit 1:8: “self-controlled”). The references to being

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“community-relations damage” than “sexual immorality.”

<sup>73</sup> Tit 1:7 employs the synonym *anepklēton*: “blameless, unimpeachable, without reproach, subject to no accusation.”

<sup>74</sup> There are two main options for the meaning of this phrase (1 Tim 3:2, 12; Tit 1:6): (1) “married only once” (NRSV, NAB); or (2) “faithful in marriage” (CEV), “faithful to his wife” (NLT). A prohibition against polygamy is unlikely given the application of a similar prohibition to women in 1 Tim 5:9 (only widows who have been the “wife of one husband” can be enrolled as official church widows). Two considerations speak in favor of the first option. First, there is evidence that both Jews and gentiles in antiquity commended people who did not remarry after the death of their spouse, remaining faithful to the memory of their first and only spouse. Paul permitted Christian widows to marry but considered them “more blessed” if they did not remarry (1 Cor 7:39-40; Rom 7:1-6). Second, given an early Christian view of marriage as a symbol of the relationship of Christ and the church (Eph 5:21-33), it is plausible that as representatives of the church, church officials were required to model the exclusive union of Christ and church in their lifelong fidelity to one partner, whether that partner was dead or alive (cf. 2 Cor 11:2: “I promised you in marriage *to one husband*, to present you to Christ as a pure virgin”). Cf. Quinn, *The Letter to Titus*, 79, 85-87. Certainty, though, is not possible. At the very least, the phrase presupposes marital fidelity while one’s spouse is alive.

“irreproachable” call to mind also the vice list in 1:9-11, which includes among the “lawless” “the sexually immoral / fornicators” (*pornoi*) and, specifically, “men who take males to bed” (*arsenokoitai*).<sup>75</sup> Timothy is enjoined to be “an example/model” (*typos*) in matters of “purity” (*hagneia*; 1 Tim 4:12), and Titus “an example/model of good works in all things” (Tit 2:7).<sup>76</sup> The requirement of exemplary character explains the caution not to “lay hands on (ordain) anyone hastily” (1 Tim 5:22). Even the disciplinary procedure for elders/presbyters underscores the exemplary character of the office: “Never accept an accusation against an elder, except ‘on the evidence of two or three witnesses’ [Deut 19:15; cf. Matt 18:16]. Rebuke in the presence of all those who are sinning, in order that the others may also have fear” (1 Tim 5:19-20). Unlike Matt 18:15-20, there is no private one-on-one confrontation between accuser and accused in the case of elders. The offending elder is first confronted by several people and then, presumably following or in expectation of the offender’s repentance, given a church-wide rebuke. Whether or not an elder wants to function as an example to the congregation, an elder is an example. When an elder commits a serious infraction, a bad example is given to the church; hence, the need to correct the elder in front of the entire church.

Because of this exemplary character of the office of minister, both Soards and Grenz feel it is appropriate to withhold ordained office from p/sa homosexual persons. It is interesting to see what other reasons each uses to justify a reversal of position from membership to ordination. Soards targets the authority of scripture, which ordained ministers are sworn to uphold and live by.

The case for church membership for homosexuals should not, however, be extended logically to argue for the ordination of persons engaging in homosexual activities. Ordained persons are not an elite, but they serve a particular role in the life of the church.... The matter of the authority of scripture is at the heart of the issue of ordination and at the center of this particular controversy over the ordination of homosexuals.... The biblical assessment of homosexual behavior articulates a condemnation of such activity. The conditions for ordination in the [PCUSA] *Book of Order* rightly recognize the authoritative place of the scriptures in...guiding the lives and work of ordained ministers.<sup>77</sup>

We can concur that scripture is clear about denying ordained office to p/sa homosexual

<sup>75</sup> The argument might be made that since we do not abide by all the requirements today for church officers (limited to men, possibly also excluding men who have remarried for any reason), we need not abide by the requirement of sexual purity. To claim such a thing would be to assert, falsely, that everything written in a particular NT book carried equal weight for its author or for subsequent communities of faith who possessed a broader canonical context. Prohibitions of various types of sexual immorality were universally held by all NT authors for all believers, clergy and laity alike, and are specifically designated as acts leading to exclusion from God’s kingdom. The same cannot be said for some of the particular requirements for church office espoused here in the Pastoral Epistles.

<sup>76</sup> For explicit references to Paul’s apostolic role as an example for imitation, cf. 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:7, 9; 1 Tim 1:16; Acts 20:35. 1 Pet 5:3 exhorts elders to “be examples to the flock.” Q/Luke 6:39 (par. Matt 15:14) asks rhetorically, “Can a blind person guide a blind person?” Those who want the glory of leadership must become the greatest servant (Mark 9:35). For other texts that speak of a higher level of faithfulness for those in leadership positions, cf. Q/Luke 12:42 par.; John 10:11; 13:15; Acts 6:3; 2 Cor 6:3-4; 1 Thess 2:10-12; Jas 3:1.

<sup>77</sup> *Scripture and Homosexuality*, 78, 80.

persons (cf. 1 Tim 1:9-10 with 1 Tim 3:2-12; Tit 1:5-7). Yet it is equally clear that scripture mandates that the church disassociate from unrepentant Christians who engage in same-sex intercourse (cf. 1 Cor 5:10-11 with 1 Cor 6:9-10). Why insist on one and not the other?

Grenz appeals to the inherently sinful nature of same-sex intercourse, the absence of repentance from self-affirming homosexual persons, and the theological symbolism of the marriage bond:

In the end, the fitness of practicing homosexual persons for ordination does not rise or fall with pragmatic concerns or even their giftedness for ministry, but with the moral status of same-sex intercourse.... If sexual behavior within the context of a stable gay or lesbian relationship is proper,...there may in the end be no inherent moral impediment to the ordination of persons in such relationships. The deliberations in these chapters, however, have led to quite different conclusions: Same-sex intercourse is ethically problematic, and same-sex relationships are not appropriate sexual unions....

...We are, of course, all sinful—even clergy. Therefore, the exemplary disciple is not marked by perfection..., but by a sense of humility that leads to confession of personal sin (1 John 1:9) and the earnest desire to forsake sin. A person who willfully continues in sinful practices—whatever these may be—is not fit for ordained leadership....

...there is something unique about sexual failure.... both marriage and the informal friendship bond are theological metaphors picturing aspects of God and God's intended relationship to humans. Consequently, to transgress the biblical ethic of chastity is to efface what God has ordained to be a powerful theological symbol. For this reason, the church is surely not misguided in instinctively expecting—even demanding—of all ordained persons as “examples to the flock” exemplary conduct in the realm of sexuality, whether they are married or single.<sup>78</sup>

Each of these are excellent reasons for denying membership, not just ordination. The first paragraph is surprising in view of Grenz's earlier distinction for membership between homosexual persons who were in stable relationships and homosexual persons who were in unstable relationships. Here Grenz gives no hint that stable homosexual relationships are somehow a significant improvement over unstable ones. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that we have come to a sad point in church history when, in terms of moral behavior, we expect of ministers only what the authors of the New Testament expected of all believers; and of the average believer what NT authors expected of pagans.

Of our three dialogue partners, Hays alone leans toward the view that the church should ordain p/sa homosexual persons.

It is unfortunate that the battle line has been drawn in the denominations at the question of ordination of homosexuals. The ensuing struggle has had the unfortunate effect of reinforcing a double standard for clergy and lay morality; it would be far better to articulate a single set of moral norms that apply to all Jesus' followers. Strictures against homosexuality belong in the church's moral catechesis, not in its ordination requirements. It is arbitrary to single out homosexuality as a special sin that precludes

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<sup>78</sup> *Welcoming But Not Affirming*, 145-46.

ordination. (Certainly, the New Testament does not do this.) The church has no analogous special rules to exclude from ordination the greedy or self-righteous. Such matters are left to the discernment of the bodies charged with examining candidates for ordination; these bodies must determine whether the individual candidate has the gifts and graces requisite for ministry. In any event, a person of homosexual orientation seeking to live a life of disciplined abstinence would clearly be an appropriate candidate for ordination.<sup>79</sup>

In one sense, Hays is at least more consistent than Soards and Grenz. He recognizes, correctly, that overlooking homosexual behavior in matters of membership while targeting it for ordination reinforces “a double standard for clergy and lay morality.” Although Grenz and Soards are right that the church ought to expect more of ministers than members, that “more” in this instance should have to do only with fewer allowances for *repented* homosexual acts. Biblically speaking, neither members nor ordained officeholders can be granted immunity from excommunication if they persistently engage in *unrepented* homosexual acts.

Hays’s other statements, though, are problematic. It is hardly “arbitrary to single out homosexuality as a special sin.” In the first place, the ones who are most responsible for “singling out” homosexual behavior are those who have pushed for its acceptance, in defiance of scripture and two millennia of church teaching and practice. Second, if large segments of the church and the prevailing secular culture were lobbying vigorously for approval of greed and self-righteousness, the church would have to reaffirm its historic opposition to those vices as well. As it is, the bodies charged with examining candidates for ordination ordinarily do not ordain self-affirming greedy persons or self-righteous persons. However, given the current cultural tolerance of homosexual practice, many such bodies, if left to their own devices, would indeed ordain p/sa homosexual persons in so-called “stable” relationships. In order to guard against this, the church has no choice but to reassert its long-standing position against ordaining p/sa homosexual persons. Even so, this reassertion has usually taken the form of general chastity requirements which do not “single out” p/sa homosexual persons but rather preclude from ordination all unrepentant persons having sexual intercourse with a person other than an opposite-sex spouse. An arbitrary course of action on the part of the church would be to do nothing to prevent the ordination of p/sa homosexual persons and thereby condone a flagrant violation of scripture. Hays’s position on membership and ordination may be more consistent than that of Soards and Grenz, but his consistency moves him even further away from scripture’s stance toward Christians who engage in same-sex intercourse.

Hays’s position also raises an additional problem. Once a denomination takes the step of allowing the ordination of persons who are known to be involved in homosexual behavior, it can be taken for granted that the day is not far off when candidates for ordination who cannot affirm the ordination of p/sa homosexual persons will themselves be denied ordination. Two things that the homosexual lobby both within and outside the church has not had a strong track record on: an aversion to controlling power and a democratic tolerance of those who oppose same-sex intercourse. Currently, in some

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<sup>79</sup> *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 403.

mainline denominations that treat same-sex intercourse as sin, an ordained officer can believe, teach, and preach that same-sex intercourse is a perfectly acceptable expression of sexuality and not fear any sanctions (so much for the intolerance of those opposed to same-sex intercourse). Those expecting the same charitable posture from the other side if the denominational stance on homosexual behavior is reversed are likely to be disappointed. We might suspect that the demonization of opponents as “homophobic, prejudiced, narrow-minded, hate-filled bigots” would make it very hard for most proponents of same-sex intercourse to allow the ordination of such persons. No sane Christian is going to vote to ordain hate-filled bigots. Moreover, most denominations already have precedents for denying ordination to candidates who question the ordination credentials of whole groups (women, African Americans).<sup>80</sup> You can bet that pro-‘homosex’ forces will put the matter on the same plane as sexism and racism (as they have been doing all along), even though the analogy is clearly flawed (same-sex intercourse is about sinful behavior, not neutral being). Seminaries affiliated with denominations that support the “right” of p/sa homosexual persons to be ordained will almost immediately refuse to hire candidates for faculty positions who are known to hold a different position.<sup>81</sup> Eventually, any church officer that teaches or preaches from the pulpit that same-sex intercourse is sin will be threatened with church discipline. Then the church will have come full circle to moral insanity. The church that once expressed reluctance to discipline p/sa homosexual persons will one day have no hesitation to impose discipline on ordained officers who regard homosexual practice as sin. A few people like Hays who regard homosexual behavior as immoral may have risen to levels of power and status that leave them largely unaffected by such turn-arounds in church policy. Most others who share his view will not be so fortunate.

The final sentence of the quotation from Hays suggests that Hays is not entirely clear in his own mind that p/sa homosexual persons should be permitted ordination (“In any event...”). We can agree with him that “a person of homosexual orientation seeking to live a life of disciplined abstinence would clearly be an appropriate candidate for ordination,” so long as “seeking to live” means “having success in living” and “not self-affirming” of homosexual behavior. Most of us would not want to see ordained a person “seeking” to be faithful to his wife but repeatedly succumbing to acts of adultery and preaching in favor of “open” marriages.

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<sup>80</sup> For example, in the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), no candidate can be ordained who does not affirm the ordination of women. This policy precipitated the splitting off of churches to form the Presbyterian Church in America. [Author’s note: On 8/16/07 I received an email from the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the PCA, L. Roy Taylor. Rev. Taylor wrote: “The ordination of women was not the primary cause for the formation of the PCA in 1973. There were two categories of factors, (1) theological decline, and (2) a trend toward a more hierarchal polity. Both factors had numerous sub-divisions that developed over a couple of generations.” While not disagreeing with Rev. Taylor, I think my choice of verbs “precipitated” is correct, inasmuch as the court case that touched off the departure of some churches involved the PCUSA’s refusal to ordain Wynn Kenyon because the latter would not agree to participate actively in the ordination of women.]

<sup>81</sup> Already many mainline-denominational seminaries—even within denominations that officially regard same-sex intercourse as sin—have a built-in bias against hiring candidates opposed to same-sex intercourse. If they hire them at all, it is often only in small enough numbers that they pose no threat to “taking over” the seminary from pro-homosex faculty already ensconced in positions of power.