

Immoralism, Homosexual Unhealth, and Scripture

**A Response to Peterson and Hedlund's
"Heterosexism, Homosexual Health, and the Church"**

Part III: Scripture

by

Robert A. J. Gagnon, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of New Testament, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
gagnon@pts.edu

© 2005 Robert A. J. Gagnon

I. Introduction

This portion of my response to Peterson and Hedlund's Critique of my work corresponds to their [Part 2](#) on Scripture. The general pattern of their approach is to ignore most of the historical and scriptural evidence that I accumulate for developing a position, misrepresent the remainder, and charge me repeatedly with distorting the biblical witness through "unethical" selectivity and "heterosexist" bias. Below we shall show that the distortion of the witness of Scripture rests with Peterson and Hedlund, treating in succession their discussion of:

- I. Dan Via's alleged rebuttal of my Scripture case
- II. The creation texts
- III. The Sodom and Gibeah narratives
- IV. The Levitical prohibitions
- V. The "silence" of Jesus
- VI. Law vs. gospel?
- VII. The divorce-and-remarriage analogy
- VIII. St. Paul and the exploitation argument
- IX. St. Paul and the orientation argument
- X. Core values

I direct readers' attention particularly to new material in sections II, VII, VIII, and IX.

This is not an exhaustive critique of all of Peterson and Hedlund's exegetical and hermeneutical mistakes and their misrepresentations of my work. There are too many

mistakes and misrepresentations to do a full response. Consider this a selection of some of the conspicuous problems in their interpretation of Scripture.

I. Dan Via's Alleged Rebuttal of My Scripture Case

I noted in Part 1 an intimation on the part of Peterson and Hedlund that the accuracy of their work with biblical texts would be even more suspect than their handling of the scientific data. A more direct admission of their biblical 'non-expertise' (to put it delicately) appears on p. 7 of their "Discussion." There they state, referring to *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Fortress, 2003), which I co-authored with Dan Via: "Professor Dan O. Via has rebutted many of Professor Gagnon's theological arguments much more effectively than we could hope to." This is a problem for Peterson and Hedlund because Via does not give an effective rebuttal of my arguments at any point.

Even to venture such a claim about the alleged effectiveness of Via's rebuttal, however misguided, requires that Peterson and Hedlund at least read my contribution in the same volume. But I see no evidence that Peterson and Hedlund read either my essay (pp. 40-92) or my response to Via (pp. 99-105), to say nothing of my online rejoinder to Via's response (click here for [pdf](#) or [html](#) versions). In their footnotes they once cite from Via (n. 86) and once cite from "Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible*, pp. 264, 296, 424" (n. 82) but the former is not from my material and the latter is a bit of a feat since the book has only 117 pages. Beyond that, what they don't acknowledge in their reference to Via is that Via himself, in his response to my essay, made *no effort* to rebut my "accumulation of biblical texts condemning homosexual practice" (p. 94). This is telling because Via *does* make such an effort in his own essay, where he responds to my book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* but clearly did not read it carefully. Possibly the 500 pages was too long for him to digest the whole adequately (a criticism that applies equally to Peterson and Hedlund). However, after reading my more condensed argument in my 50-page essay, where he could hardly ignore my arguments, he in effect capitulates on the point.

Professor Via, this champion for Peterson and Hedlund's views on Scripture and homosexuality, justifies his surrender of the Scripture argument in two ways (ibid.). First, he says that, anyway, he agrees that "Scripture gives no explicit approval to same-sex intercourse." This is understated: Scripture gives frequent explicit and implicit strong rejection of same-sex intercourse. Via's first justification also does not respond to the thrust of my argument; namely, that Scripture treats an other-sex requirement as a core value in sexual ethics, not just as a peripheral matter. Even given these failings, this first justification for surrendering the Scripture argument is in obvious tension with positions espoused by Peterson and Hedlund. For Via at least admits on various occasions in his essay that Scripture's opposition to homosexual practice is "absolute"; that is, it transcends the existence of any loving commitment on the part of those engaged in homosexual activity. Do Peterson and Hedlund not recognize the problem that such an

understanding has for their own claims that St. Paul and others are not addressing loving, committed sexual unions?

Via's second justification for not disputing my analysis of Scripture is that "the absolute prohibition can be overridden regardless of how many times it is stated." This too sidesteps my point that the hermeneutical significance of Scripture's witness is located not just in the number of times that the prohibition is explicitly and implicitly stated. That reflects the pervasive dimension of Scripture's opposition but not the strength and intensity of that opposition and the countercultural character of that witness relative to its own day. Even so, Via's statement in his "Response" stands in tension with, indeed contradiction to, his confession to Scripture's authority in his essay; namely, "I take the Bible to be the highest authority for Christians in theological and ethical matters" (p. 2). This tension/contradiction holds despite the further qualifications of his position; for a core value in the eyes of Scripture's authors has to carry tremendous weight even in a non-inerrantist position. Since Peterson and Hedlund endorse at least Via's main arguments, the same tension/contradiction between, on the one hand, confessing Scripture's ultimate authority for matters of faith and practice and, on the other hand, disregarding core values of the apostolic witness holds for the position of Peterson and Hedlund as well.

II. The Creation Texts in Genesis 1-2

A. Holistic male-female complementarity. Peterson and Hedlund seem not to understand my argument about the relevance of Genesis 1-2 (part 2, pp. 1-2). It is not simply an argument about parts fitting. The story of human origins in Genesis 2:21-24 takes a holistic approach to man-woman complementarity. Irrespective of the extent to which this story is taken symbolically or literally, it communicates that man and woman are each other's sexual counterparts, two halves of a single sexual whole. The Hebrew word often translated "rib" (*tsela'*), denoting what is extracted from the *'adam* (earthling, human) to form woman, is better understood as "side," in accordance with its 40 other occurrences in the Old Testament. This also accords with some later ancient Jewish interpretation. *The image of one flesh becoming two sexes grounds the principle of two sexes becoming one flesh.* The only way to restore the original sexual unity is to reunite (not just unite) the primordial constituent parts, man and woman. That this two-dimensional character of human sexuality is an important part of the sacred architecture of the human creation is suggested by the fact that the word *tsela'* refers nearly everywhere else in the Old Testament to the "side" of sacred architecture: the ark, tabernacle, incense altar, and temple rooms (compare Paul's usage of temple imagery for the human body in its sexual capacity, 1 Cor 6:19). So far as extant evidence indicates, no Jew in early Judaism regarded this binary feature of Gen 1:27 and 2:24 as optional for human sexual relations; that is, as a feature easily substituted by a male-male or female-female combination.

B. Use of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 by Jesus and Paul. In accordance with Jesus' own teaching in Mark 10:6-9, the creation texts in Genesis 1-2 play a pivotal rule in defining

normative sexuality. Indeed, Jesus predicated his views on marital monogamy and indissolubility on the self-contained wholeness of the two sexes in complementary union. This is clear enough from his back-to-back citation of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24: “*For this reason,*” namely, because God “made them *male and female,*” “a man . . . will be joined to his woman/wife and *the two* will become one flesh.” Because there are essentially two and only two sexes, the presence of a male and female in a sexual relationship is necessary and sufficient for reconstituting a sexual whole, so far as the number of persons in the union is concerned. Thus a third party is neither needed nor desirable. Thus Jesus implicitly extended the logic of the twoness of the sexes that had always been incumbent on women (polyandry was unknown) to men as well, closing a loophole that Moses had granted due to human “hardness of heart” by appeal to “the beginning of creation” (Mark 10:5-8 par. Matt 19:4-5, 8).

Saint Paul understood the implications of Jesus’ teaching about human sexuality for homosexual practice. His chief indictment of idolatry and homosexual practice in Romans 1:23-27 contains a clear intertextual echo or allusion to Genesis 1:26-27. There are here not only eight points of correspondence between Gen 1:26-27 and Rom 1:23, 26-27 but also a threefold sequential agreement: (1) God’s *likeness* and *image* in humans; (2) dominion over the animal kingdom (*birds, animals, reptiles*); and (3) *male-female* differentiation. The point of the echo is to show that idolatry and same-sex intercourse constitute a frontal assault on the work of the Creator in nature. Those who suppressed the truth about God transparent in creation were more likely to suppress the truth about the embodied complementarity of the sexes transparent in nature, choosing instead to gratify contrary innate impulses.

Just as Gen 1:26-27 lies in the background of Paul’s remarks in Rom 1:23-27, so too Paul cites Gen 2:24c (“ . . . the two shall become one flesh”) in close proximity to his indictment of “men who lie with males” (*arsenokoitai*) in 1 Corinthians 6:9 (see 6:16). Although the immediate point of the citation was to show that immoral sexual intercourse on the part of believers involves the indwelling Christ, Paul could not have missed the relevance of Genesis 2:24a-b (“a man shall . . . become joined to his woman”) for his rejection of male homosexual intercourse in 1 Corinthians 6:9, given the echo to Genesis 1:27 in Romans 1:23-27. Indeed, his use of Gen 1:27 and Gen 2:21-24 later in the same letter, 11:7-12, though it has problems, clearly shows that Paul regarded these texts as integral for establishing the significance of male-female differentiation in the context of marriage. Indeed, the discussion of hair and headgear has overtones of concern for homosexual practice; namely, that by deliberately obliterating markers of sexual differentiation the community might move down a slippery slope of embracing homoerotic relations.

Hence in his two primary critiques of homosexual practice (cf. 1 Tim 1:10 also) Paul took the same two creation texts that Jesus lifted up as decisive for defining sexual ethics, Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, and applied them to various sexual issues, including an absolute rejection of homosexual practice.

For further discussion of the creation texts see pp. 25-29 of "[A Faithful Journey Through the Bible and Homosexuality?](#)" (hereafter "Faithful Journey?"), my response to two ELCA documents, "Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two" (produced by the ELCA's Task Force on Sexuality) and "Background Essay on Biblical Texts" (commissioned by the Task Force).

C. On hermaphroditism, congenital factors in homosexuality, and the twoness of the sexes. Peterson and Hedlund argue that the existence of hermaphroditism (the 'intersexed') and congenital factors for subsequent homosexual development discount my reading of the Genesis text—though it is better put to say, 'discount Jesus' reading of Genesis 1-2.' They do not.

As regards the intersexed, the phenomenon of extreme sexual ambiguity, where assignment to one or the other sex becomes tricky, is only a tiny fraction of a fraction of 1% of the population. All absolute sexual standards, including incest and pedophilia, have some ambiguity around the edges. Where exactly is the line that makes a person sufficiently unrelated by blood or a child no longer a child? Yet we don't throw out the absolute standard. The existence of hermaphroditism, of which people in the ancient world were aware, does not invalidate the centrality of the twoness of the sexes on which Jesus' argument for marital monogamy and indissolubility was predicated. People recognize that hermaphroditism derives from an error in nature. It is not part of what God deemed to be "very good" at creation. The human being afflicted with the condition is not an error but the affliction is.

Recently I rewatched the riveting movie *The Elephant Man*, the story of John Merrick, a man grossly deformed since birth with twisted spine, massive bony outgrowth, and tumor-ridden skin. While God uses even extreme deformities for redemptive purposes, I don't know anyone who would contend that such afflictions—a baby born brain damaged or severely-conjoined "Siamese" twins—represent nature's well-working processes or a new standard for extrapolating God's will for sexual behavior. Should the existence of "Siamese" twins do away with a monogamy standard? I don't think that even Peterson and Hedlund would argue that. But they would argue that we should discount the significance of sexual differentiation for mate selection, even though a monogamy standard derives from the self-contained character of merging the two sexes.

As regards considering congenital factors in homoerotic development part of God's good creation, this is a development that is attributable to the Fall, like so many sexual desires that are inconsistent with prerequisites for structural compatibility. After all, I'm sure that Peterson and Hedlund wouldn't want to argue that any prenatal, congenital, or early developmental factors contributing to pedophilia or intense polyamorous affections are part of God's good creation. No, they are part of the Fall.

D. Peterson and Hedlund's convoluted argument about the Fall. Speaking of the Fall, Peterson and Hedlund develop a most convoluted argument in relation to it:

But a more heterosexist dimension of Professor Gagnon's "perfect" heterosexual complementarity concept is that he omits incorporating the temptation and Fall in his

interpretation of the Creation texts. This both helps idealize his "perfect" complementarity heterosexuality concept and also sets the stage for later constructing a parallel discomplementarity view of homosexuality by inserting multiple references to the Fall in his interpretation of the Romans 1 references to same-sex relationships. A reasonable interpretation of the importance of the Fall is that it not only introduced the potential for sexual and non-sexual abuse within sexual relationships even when anatomically complementary but also the potential for good committed relationships even when anatomically not complementary. This reality could be the prophetic judgment of our time, just as new judgments about cosmology, slavery, women's rights, segregation and women's ordination developed in the past.

In response:

1. It is false to say that I don't discuss the Fall in connection with the creation texts. See *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, p. 60 n. 43:

It is interesting that while J views the subordination of women to men as a product of the fall (implying the woman's equal status pre-fall), he unmistakably views the divine authorization for (and only for) heterosexual marriage as a pre-fall phenomenon. Those who argue that the case for validating homosexual behavior is comparable to the case for validating women's equal status overlook this point.

2. I don't say more about the Fall because God's design for male-female pairing precedes the Fall; it is not a product of the Fall. Jesus himself appeals to the pre-Fall creation texts, Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 regarding, respectively, creation "male and female" and the joining of "man and woman" into "one flesh." As pre-Fall events they represent God's supreme will for human sexuality, as again Jesus advocated ("but from the beginning of creation . . ."). Peterson and Hedlund might as well argue that Jesus' use of Genesis 1-2 in Mark 10 is invalid because he doesn't refer explicitly to the Fall in Genesis 3. A reference to the Fall is always implicit when talking about pre-Fall developments: departure from the twoness of a male-female bond established by God at creation, whether in homosexual or polyamorous relations, is by definition part of the Fall and is thus to be rejected.

3. Instead of drawing the proper conclusion that desire for homosexual practice is part of the Fall Peterson and Hedlund argue the reverse; namely, that the Fall introduced "the potential for good committed relationships even when anatomically not complementary." How about that? The Fall brought new good to the world! Actually proper Christian doctrine holds that the Fall introduced sin into the world, which in turn brought an array of impulses that are contrary to the way God created us. Remember again Jesus' own position: "but from the beginning it was not so" (Matt 19:8).

4. This is part of Paul's point in Romans 1:18-32, although Peterson and Hedlund are angry with me for claiming that the Fall has anything to do with this text. This is in spite of fact that I make the case for a clear intertextual echo in Romans 1:23-27 to Genesis 1:26-27 on pp. 289-93. As I note there, "even though Rom 1:18-32 speaks of events after the fall, for Paul all human rebellions are in one way or another rebellions against God's will for humankind set in motion at creation" (p. 291). What would Peterson and Hedlund have us believe? That the continuation of the vice list in Rom 1:29-31 ("envy, murder,"

etc.) has nothing to do with the Fall? That these vices do not represent departures from God's will at creation? One of the things that Peterson and Hedlund do not understand is that, while the human "exchanging" and the divine "handing over" are events that occur after Genesis 3, and are ongoing, they reflect responses by humans and God to God's creation will still transparent in the material structures of nature.

E. Peterson and Hedlund's hapless argument about heterosexual crime. I cannot even fathom the rest of Peterson and Hedlund's argument: Because heterosexuals vastly outnumber homosexuals and thus commit more criminal acts in terms of total numbers we should . . . accept homosexual practice? No, we should not condone criminal violence and we should not condone homosexual practice. But I haven't noticed anyone in the church advocating for criminal violence. I do see Peterson and Hedlund advocating for what Scripture clearly regards as sexual immorality.

III. Genesis 19 and Judges 19: Sodom and Gibeah

A. On misrepresenting my view of the "orientation" of the men of Sodom. Peterson and Hedlund's critique of my interpretation of these narratives (p. 3 of part 2) is another instance of gross misrepresentation, here perhaps even more egregious (if that were possible) than his misrepresentation of my views on the creation narratives. Peterson and Hedlund contend that my use of the expression "homosexual rape" proves that I thought all the men who participated in the rape had a predominant homosexual orientation. They make this false claim even though I explicitly state that I do not think such to be the case:

The truth is that no one can say precisely how the Yahwist construed the motives of the men of Sodom (beyond generic evil), though a reasonable conjecture might be a combination of homoerotic or bisexual lust on the part of at least some of the crowd and an aggressive intent to dominate and humiliate strangers to Sodom by forcing on them an abominable and shameful practice. A strict either/or interpretation, *either* homosexual/bisexual lust *or* an aggressive disgrace of visitors goes beyond the wording of the text and imposes a distinction that did not always hold true in the ancient world. . . . Whether each and every man in the mob aimed solely at pure violence and domination, or whether some hoped to take advantage of the strangers for a sexual thrill as well, matters little to the story line—and certainly would have mattered little to the visitors. . . . As with the author(s) of the Levitical prohibitions, the Yahwist is less concerned with motives than with the act of penetrating a male as if he were a female, an act that by its very nature is demeaning regardless of how well it is done. (pp. 77-78)

How could I be clearer? And yet Peterson and Hedlund choose to distort what I say, apparently banking on the hope that readers of their critique will not have bothered to read my work. How they justify this morally is beyond my understanding. When I say that the Yahwist understands this story as a description of attempted "homosexual rape" I mean only that he understands a significant dimension of the evil act to be its 'same-sexness,' the demeaning of the masculine sex of the visitors by having sex with them as though they were women (i.e., by penetration). Even many commentators supportive of homosexual unions refer to the Sodom story as an attempt at "homosexual rape" and, like me, they mean no more by it than that the act is between persons of the same sex. A perfect example of this is Dan Via himself, their champion, who refers to this as an

episode of “homosexual gang rape” (*Homosexuality and the Bible*, p. 5). Now, why don’t Peterson and Hedlund make the same charge against Via that they make against me?

B. The contribution of the parallel Gibeah story. The same point applies to the Gibeah narrative in Judges 19. Peterson and Hedlund see some sort of “heterosexist” contradiction in my saying both that even penetrative rape requires some degree of sexual stimulation and that the narrator at any rate is not concerned with “psychologizing the motives of the perpetrators.” There is no contradiction here, much less a “heterosexist” one. The first point helps to establish the second point for people like Peterson and Hedlund who in their interpretation of the Gibeah story make a “strict either/or approach to the question of motivation (intent to do harm vs. sexual passion)” (p. 97).

Moreover, the attitude of the narrator of the Gibeah story toward an act of *consensual* receptive male-male intercourse is known. (Note: Scholars refer to the narrator as the Deuteronomistic Historian because he uses the Deuteronomic lawcode as a basis for evaluating Israel’s past as recorded in the books from Joshua through 2 Kings.) His attitude is clear from his caustic description of the *qedeshim*, cult figures who sometimes served as the receptive partner in male-male intercourse. Even Phyllis Bird, a prominent Old Testament scholar who wants the church to endorse committed homosexual unions and has written significant articles on the *qedeshim* and on homosexuality in the Old Testament, has acknowledged that what the Deuteronomistic Historian found most offensive about the *qedeshim* was “their repugnant associations with male homosexual activity” (“The End of the Male Cult Prostitute,” *Congress Volume Cambridge 1995* [Leiden: Brill, 1997], 75). This is apparent from the description of the *qedesh* in Deut 23:18 as a “dog,” an epithet that parallel Mesopotamian texts apply to male “men-women” precisely because they allowed themselves to be penetrated by other males (Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 48-49, 100-110; Nissinen, *Homoeeroticism*, 28-34). If the Deuteronomistic Historian was repulsed by the idea of men willingly consenting to be penetrated by other men (here too the term “abomination” [*to’evah*] is employed), then it is apparent that the same narrator of the story of Gibeah in Judges 19 would have found the attempt of the men of Gibeah to have sex with a man repulsive per se, and not just because it was coerced. Given the strong literary agreements between the story of Sodom and the story of Gibeah, evidence for how the Deuteronomistic Historian would have interpreted any act of male-male intercourse, consensual or coerced, provides strong evidence for how the Yahwist would have viewed the same; namely, as inherently or structurally offensive.

Peterson and Hedlund conclude that because the whole crowd has sex with the Levite’s concubine after failing to obtain the Levite himself the whole crowd must be heterosexual. But that conclusion no more follows than does the conclusion that their attempt at having sex with a man proves that they are all homosexual (which conclusion they reject and, contrary to what they allege, I don’t make). The Deuteronomistic Historian, like the Yahwist, no more cares what the individual sexual preferences of each man in the crowd are than he cares whether a sexual relation between a man and his mother is the fruit of genuine sexual attraction or the fruit of coercion.

C. *The Sodom and Gibeah stories as indictments of all homosexual acts.* The bottom line is this: Like so many, Peterson and Hedlund miss the obvious point that criticism of same-sex rape, like criticism of incestuous rape or a pedophilic rape, is not just a criticism of rape; nor does the presence or absence of sexual orientation play any role. Obviously same-sex, incestuous, or pedophilic rapes are compound offenses, adding, respectively, a same-sex, incestuous, or pedophilic component.

In "[Faithful Journey?](#)" pp. 36-43 I have an extensive discussion of how we know, through a series of literary- and historical-context concentric circles, that the narrator of the Sodom episode was including an indictment of male-male intercourse per se (similarly, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*, 56-62). Generally this information is already present in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, which Peterson and Hedlund claim to have read and fairly represented. However, the length of the presentation in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* seem to have overwhelmed Peterson and Hedlund and others, so I have streamlined and refocused more in "[Faithful Journey?](#)" and in *Two Views*. No biblical scholar or theologian to whom I have presented in public debate this array of "concentric circles of context" around the Sodom story has ever even attempted a refutation. So let us see if Peterson and Hedlund can do it.

Like a mantra Peterson and Hedlund repeatedly refer to my interpretation of biblical texts as misrepresentations owing to an alleged "heterosexist" bias. After demonstrating the absurdities and misrepresentations of their arguments concerning the creation texts and the Sodom/Gibeah narratives, it should be evident that the "heterosexist" label is just their way of diverting attention from the fact that they are poor exegetes and interpreters of the biblical witness.

IV. The Levitical Prohibitions (Lev 18:22; 20:13)

A. *The association with incest.* Peterson and Hedlund complain that I make an association with incest and same-sex intercourse. Yet Leviticus itself makes that association (pp. 3-4). Leviticus 20:10-16 lists the first-tier of sexual offenses: adultery, the worst forms of incest, male-male intercourse, and bestiality. All the other extant evidence from early Judaism and early Christianity also supports such a correlation in terms of severity of offense. If anything, I can make a strong case that, among consensual sexual offenses, male-male intercourse was second only to bestiality in severity (occasionally, too, there were conflicting opinions over whether man-mother incest or homosexual practice was worse). Consistent with this, St. Paul in Romans 1:24-27 treats homosexual practice as the supreme instance of suppressing divine truth so far as the horizontal level of human relations is concerned. So Peterson and Hedlund's complaint is not with me but with Scripture and the traditions. In fact, as I have noted, there are significant points of correspondence between the prohibitions of incest and the prohibitions of homosexual practice:

- Both sets of prohibitions involve acts of sexual intercourse that are strongly, pervasively, and absolutely proscribed in the canon of Scripture (this is certainly true of man-mother incest). Both are mentioned in the sex laws in Leviticus 18 and, in ch. 20, among first-tier sexual offenses.

- Both acts, incest and male-male intercourse, are regarded as wrong because they involve sex with another who is too much of a structural same—incest on the familial level of blood relatedness (no sex with "the flesh of one's own flesh" according to Leviticus 18:6), homosexual practice on the level of sex or gender.
- Both acts can be conducted in the context of adult, committed, monogamous, adult relationships.
- Both acts suffer from a disproportionately high rate of negative side-effects: incest from procreative abnormalities and intergenerational sex; male-male intercourse from higher rates of sexually transmitted disease, mental health issues, high numbers of sex partners lifetime, short-term relationships, man-boy love, problematic sexual practices (like penile-anal or oral-anal intercourse), and gender identity disorders. At the same time, neither incest nor male-male intercourse (nor any other form of consensual sexual practice, including polyamorous behavior) produces scientifically measurable harm to all participants in all circumstances.

Instead of attempting to refute these comparisons, Peterson and Hedlund try unsuccessfully to do an end run around them. First they note that “nobody condones [incest] today.” Well, that is the point, isn’t it? Since we don’t condone incestuous acts that are adult, consensual, and committed, and since too the problem with incest is analogous to the problem with homosexual practice (structurally incongruous mergers between individuals too much alike, whether on a familial or sexual level), why are they condoning homosexual unions?

B. Not the “same” potential. Peterson and Hedlund contend that the difference between homosexual practice on the one hand and incest, polyamory, and pedophilia on the other is that “homosexuality has about the same potential for constructive relationships as heterosexuality” whereas these other behaviors do not. Well now, this is not true, is it? So far as the matter of constructive relationships is concerned, one has to ignore completely the homosexual dimension, which (as I have noted) is the primary problem with homosexual behavior: the manifest arousal and attempt to merge with what one already is and shares in common with as a sexual being. Moreover, studies to date confirm that homosexual unions do not have the “same potential” as heterosexual relationships for achieving lifelong loving commitment. “*Same potential*” would include the same likelihood of success whereas, as studies indicate, male and female homosexual unions have far less likelihood of success because of basic biological differences between men and women, differences that are normally neither balanced nor supplemented in same-sex sexual relationships. In addition, one can say, too, that if not for “incest-phobia” adult incestuous relationships too would have “potential” for lifelong loving commitment. Traditional polygamous unions have greater likelihood of lifelong commitment and, ironically, of keeping down the total number of sex partners lifetime than do male homosexual unions. But we don’t support committed adult incestuous unions or committed adult polyamorous unions because, quite frankly, we recognize the structural incompatibility of sexual unions comprising close blood relations or three or more persons, irrespective of whether the relationship shows love or commitment. Even adult-adolescent relationships can be loving and committed and do not produce intrinsic, scientifically measurable harm in all circumstances, as I show in **Part 2 (IV.)** and contrary to what Peterson and Hedlund contend. True, we can demonstrate disproportionately high rates of harm for incest, polyamory, and pedophilia but the same is true for homosexual practice. Proponents of each contribute the higher rates of harm to societal phobias but most people can see through such an argument.

C. On “abomination” and intrinsic exploitation. Peterson and Hedlund complain:

Gagnon uses the word “abomination,” over 20 times in the Old Testament section, especially as meaning inherently, intrinsically or unprecedentedly evil, victimizing or exploitive—meanings which were repeated in relation to other texts in other chapters of the Bible even though the word abomination is not in the other texts.

Their footnote cites pp. 118, 120, 311, 317, 325 of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. The references on pp. 118 and 120 occur in a section where I discuss the meaning of the term *to'eva*. Should I avoid the translation “abomination” when that it is a universally accepted translation by biblical scholars? The term is not mentioned on pp. 311, 317, 325, though I do speak there of the fact that Philo, St. Paul, early Jewish writers generally, and even some Greco-Roman moralists regarded homosexual practice as inherently exploitative—not in the sense that they thought homosexual practice could only be conducted in an unloving or coercive context or always led to personal distress or societal maladaptiveness (which are Peterson and Hedlund’s restrictive definitions of exploitation) but rather in the sense that by their very nature homosexual acts intrinsically efface the stamp of maleness and femaleness imprinted on men and women respectively by attempting to treat as appropriate sexual counterparts two persons who are already of the same sex. As part of Charicles’ attack on all homosexual practice in the pseudo-Lucianic text *Affairs of the Heart* the assertion is made that male-male love is an erotic attraction for what one already is as a sexual being:

She (viz., Aphrodite) cleverly devised a twofold nature in each (species). . . . having written down a divinely sanctioned rule of necessity, that each of the two (genders) remain in their own nature and that neither should the female be masculinized contrary to nature nor too should the male be softened (*malakizesthai*) in an inappropriate manner. . . . Then wantonness, daring all, transgressed the laws of nature. . . . And who then first looked with the eyes at the male as at a female . . . ? One nature came together in one bed. But *seeing themselves in one another* they were ashamed neither of what they were doing nor of what they were having done to them. (19-20; emphasis added).

Now doesn’t this sound like “inherent exploitation” in the sense that I define it? Would Peterson and Hedlund prefer that I make up the evidence to suit their own ideology and deny that such persons viewed homosexual practice as inherently or intrinsically wrong? I can’t, and won’t, change the historical record for Peterson and Hedlund or anyone else.

V. The “Silence” of Jesus

A. The overwhelming case for Jesus’ opposition to homosexual practice. Peterson and Hedlund argue that the length of the chapter “The Witness of Jesus” in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 34 pages, is proof of its shaky, “speculative” quality (pp. 7-9). On the contrary, the length is indicative of the overwhelming weight and number of arguments that can be adduced for demonstrating Jesus’ opposition to homosexual practice. This includes Jesus’ use of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 in Mark 10, where he justifies his restriction of two persons to a sexual union by his appeal to the fact that God made us

“male and female.” But it also extends to nine other pieces of evidence, as well as another half dozen responses to counterarguments. These are all laid out quite conveniently and online in “Faithful Journey?” pp. 25-26, 30-35. Since Peterson and Hedlund don’t even attempt a rebuttal there is no point in me recapitulating the array of arguments here. Suffice it to say that there is no reasonable, historical case that Jesus was open to homosexual practice, committed or otherwise. Those who allege that he was open are simply engaging in revisionist history in the worst way.

B. Jesus’ reference to Sodom. Peterson and Hedlund go on to misconstrue Jesus’ reference to the Sodom narrative as only indicting the inhospitable act of rape by heterosexually oriented men (would the rape be morally improved for Peterson and Hedlund if it was perpetrated by homosexually oriented men?). They obviously don’t understand the text in its historical context. As I explain in both *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (pp. 90-91) and in *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (p. 73), Jesus acknowledged Sodom’s role in Scripture as the prime example of abuse of visitors (Matthew 10:14-15; Luke 10:10-12). In the context of other early Jewish texts, a major element of the special revulsion for the evil at Sodom was the attempt at treating males sexually as females (see, for example, Philo, *Abraham* 133-41 and *Questions on Genesis* 4.37; Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.194-95, 200-201 and *Jewish War* 4.483-85; 5.566; *Testament of Naphtali* 3:3-4; 2 *Enoch* 10:4; 34:1-2; within Scripture, Ezek 16:50; Jude 7; and 2 Pet 2:6-10 also point in this direction). For ample online discussion of this element in the history of interpretation, see “[Faithful Journey?](#)” pp. 39-42. Whereas Peterson see inhospitality and treating men as the receptive sexual counterparts of other men as mutually exclusive, the early interpreters of the Sodom narrative viewed the latter as a specific and egregious manifestation of the former.

Incidentally, Peterson and Hedlund suggest that I left Jesus’ use of Sodom story out of my chapter on Jesus (pp. 185-228), mentioning it only in my discussion of the history of the interpretation of the Sodom story (pp. 90-91), because I didn’t want readers to connect the dots that Jesus was only opposed to inhospitable forms of homosexual practice (top of p. 8 of their part 2). This is nonsense. I had already made the point in discussing the history of interpretation that what made the Sodom episode atrocious for Jesus and first-century Jews generally was not just the attempt at raping strangers but also the attempt at “emasculating Lot’s guests by treating them not in accordance with their nature as males but as females to be penetrated in sex” (p. 91). In retrospect I wish I had included an additional mention of it in the Jesus chapter; it would have only added to my case there. Had Peterson and Hedlund read my essay in *Homosexuality and the Bible* they would have seen that I include discussion of Jesus’ reference to Sodom in my treatment of “The Witness of Jesus.”

C. Anal penetration as only a subordinate problem. Peterson and Hedlund then try to get around the implications of Jesus’ interpretation of Sodom by arguing that as many as 30% of homosexual men don’t engage in anal intercourse and some heterosexuals do. This observation, which incidentally exaggerates with the 30% figure, is entirely beside the point inasmuch as Scripture identifies as the main problem with homosexual behavior as the same-sex erotic content. When St. Paul talks about it in Romans 1:24-27 the focus

is squarely on the immoral quality of homoerotic “passions” and “desires,” not on any specific homoerotic act. It is the active acquiescence to erotic attraction by men for essential “maleness” and by women for essential “femaleness” that is the root issue, not any specific technique. Do Peterson and Hedlund seriously believe that the biblical authors and Jesus and ancient Jews generally would not have found erotic fondling by two persons of the same sex offensive? That so long as erotic touching did not include penile penetration, they wouldn’t have seen a problem? It is historically absurd. That is like arguing that incest or adultery short of penetration would have been acceptable to them.

D. Peterson and Hedlund’s morality: purely relational without structural prerequisites.

Peterson and Hedlund assert that my “biblical priority for sexual morality is more anatomic than relational” (again, the complementary argument is more than anatomy; see above). What this statement really means is that Peterson and Hedlund don’t believe that there should be any prerequisites for structural complementarity that transcend the erotic love that persons have for each other, unless scientifically measurable harm can be ascertained in all circumstances. But that means no absolute rules against polyamory, incest, and even pedophilia; everything will have to be taken on a case by case basis. We cannot jettison the notion that sexual relationships must meet certain structural prerequisites before the quality of the relationship can be considered; that is, objective facets of congruity or complementarity that are grounded in nature or physical makeup and transcend positive dispositions of the heart or mind and even positive behaviors. Apparently Peterson and Hedlund believe otherwise. I think most people, though, don’t want to see sexual requirements and standards devolve to the place where Peterson and Hedlund find themselves.

VI. Law versus Gospel

In their part 2, F.2 (pp. 8-9), Peterson and Hedlund take exception to my relating serial unrepentant sexual immorality to judgment. On p. 221 I list seven areas where Jesus “intensified the law’s demand”; as my “for example” indicates the list is not exhaustive. Nor, contrary to what Peterson and Hedlund allege, does the enumeration indicate prioritization (I list sexual ethics first). I then add: “In most of these areas, we have sayings of Jesus indicating that failure to comply leads to exclusion from the kingdom of God.” Peterson and Hedlund take offense at (stumble over) this assertion. Too bad: The witness of Jesus and the apostolic witness, including Paul, are absolutely unequivocal on this point. Instead of dealing with the numerous New Testament texts, including sayings of Jesus, that deal with this point, they simply ignore them and attack me for being faithful to this witness. The early Reformers, including those from the Lutheran tradition, held a similar view to what I espouse (see my [“Ed Schroeder Parodies the Lutheran Faith”](#)). For example, in Philip Melanchthon states in his *Apology for the Augsburg Confession*, Part VI:

Likewise the faith of which we speak exists in repentance i.e., it is conceived in the terrors of conscience, which feels the wrath of God against our sins, and seeks the remission of sins, and to be freed from sin. And in such terrors and other afflictions this faith ought to

grow and be strengthened. *Wherefore it cannot exist in those who live according to the flesh, who are delighted by their own lusts and obey them.* Accordingly, Paul says, Rom. 8, 1 [and 8:4]: There is, therefore, now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. So, too, vv. 12. 13: We are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die; but if ye, through the Spirit, do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. *Wherefore, the faith which receives remission of sins in a heart terrified and fleeing from sin does not remain in those who obey their desires, neither does it coexist with mortal sin.* (emphases added)

Peterson and Hedlund speak of this as a personal merit doctrine but this is a false characterization of what I say in my book, and of how Jesus, Paul, and the Reformers interpret this theological understanding. No one can merit their way to heaven but people can behave in such a way as to disregard a living faith in Christ and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Then the confession of Christ's Lordship becomes meaningless: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord; will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father in heaven'" (Matt 7:21). The necessity of a transformed life clearly includes the sexual life. Jesus believed that what one did sexually could get one thrown into hell; that one should "cut off" an eye or hand if it threatened one's downfall because it was better to go into heaven maimed than to go into hell full-bodied (Matthew 5:29-30, sandwiched in between two antitheses involving sex). For an accumulation of other sayings of Jesus that refer to coming eschatological judgment even against those who profess allegiance to God, see my online "[Rejoinder to Walter Wink](#)," pp. 23-30.

Paul repeatedly warned people of the potential disaster of serial, unrepentant sexual conduct. Thus he could say to the Thessalonian believers, in the earliest extant New Testament document:

For you know what commands we gave to you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God: your holiness, that you abstain from sexual immorality (*porneia*) . . . [and not live] like the Gentiles who do not know God. . . . because the Lord is an avenger regarding all these things. . . . For God called us not to sexual uncleanness (*akatharsia*) but in holiness. Therefore the one who rejects [these commands] rejects not humans but the God who gives his Holy Spirit to us. (1 Thess 4:2-8)

And to the Galatian Christians:

The works of the flesh are obvious, which are: sexual immorality (*porneia*), sexual uncleanness (*akatharsia*), licentiousness (*aselgeia*) . . . , which I am warning you about, just as I warned you before, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. . . . Stop deceiving yourselves; God is not to be mocked, for whatever one sows this one will also reap. For the one who casts seed into one's flesh will reap a harvest of destruction and decay from the flesh, but the one who casts seed into the Spirit will reap a harvest of eternal life from the Spirit. And let us not grow tired of doing what is right for in due time we will reap, *if* we do not relax our efforts. (Gal 5:19-21; 6:7-9)

And again to the Corinthians, in the context of how to deal with a practicing, self-affirming Christian participant in an incestuous adult union:

Or do you not realize that unrighteous people will not inherit God's kingdom? Stop deceiving yourselves. Neither the sexually immoral (the *pornoi*), nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate males who play the sexual role of females (*malakoi*), nor men who lie with males (*arsenokoitai*) . . . will inherit the kingdom of God. And these things some of you used to be. But you washed yourselves off, you were made holy (sanctified), you were made righteous (justified) in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:9-11).

In 2 Corinthians Paul expresses deep concern that

I may have to mourn over many who have continued in their former sinning and did not repent of the sexual uncleanness (*akatharsia*), sexual immorality (*porneia*), and licentiousness (*aselgeia*) that they practiced. (12:21)

The message of Colossians and Ephesians is similar:

So put to death the members that belong to the earth: sexual immorality (*porneia*), sexual uncleanness (*akatharsia*), passion, evil desire . . . because of which things the wrath of God is coming [on the children of disobedience], in which things you also once walked, when you were living in them. But now put away all (such) things . . . , because you have stripped off the old humanity with its practices and clothed yourselves with the new, which is being renewed into knowledge according to the image of the one who created it. (Col 3:5-10)

[N]o longer walk as the Gentiles walk, . . . who . . . have given themselves up to licentiousness (*aselgeia*) for the doing of every sexual uncleanness (*akatharsia*). . . . Sexual immorality (*porneia*) and sexual uncleanness (*akatharsia*) of any kind . . . must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. . . . Know this indeed, that every sexually immoral person (*pornos*) or sexually unclean person (*akathartos*) . . . has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God is coming on the children of disobedience. (Eph 4:17-19; 5:3-6)

And so too the Pastoral Epistles:

The law is not laid down for the righteous, but for the lawless and disobedient, the ungodly and sinners, the unholy and profane, killers of fathers and killers of mothers, murderers, the sexually immoral (*pornoi*), males who take other males to bed (*arsenokoitai*), kidnappers (or: slave dealers), liars, perjurers, and whatever else is opposed to sound teaching that accords with the gospel. (1 Tim 1:9-11)

What could be clearer? How many times does Paul have to say it? Sex matters. Serial unrepentant sexual immorality can put a believer at risk of not inheriting the coming kingdom of God. Believers should not deceive themselves into thinking that they can persist unrepentantly in immoral sexual behavior and still be saved. For Paul, *porneia*, *akatharsia*, and *aselgeia* included same-sex intercourse at or near the top of a list of sexual offenses. Just as Paul correlated man-male intercourse with sexual immorality (*porneia*) in 1 Cor 6:9 (cf. 1 Tim 1:10), so too he treated same-sex intercourse as the prime example of “sexual uncleanness” (*akatharsia*) in Rom 1:24-27:

Therefore, God gave them over, in the desires of their hearts, to a sexual uncleanness (*akatharsia*) consisting of their bodies being dishonored among themselves. . . . to

dishonorable passions, for even their females exchanged the natural use (i.e., of the male as regards sexual intercourse) for that which is contrary to nature; ²⁷and likewise also the males, having left behind the natural use of the female (as regards sexual intercourse), were inflamed with their yearning for one another, males with males committing indecency and in return receiving in themselves the payback which was necessitated by their straying.

Paul also made it abundantly clear later in Rom 6:19 that believers must no longer “present [the] members [of their body] as slaves to sexual uncleanness (*akatharsia*) and to lawlessness for (the doing of) lawlessness,” but instead “present [their] members as slaves to righteousness for holiness.” In other words, all believers should now cease from any sexual uncleanness that they participated in as unbelievers. Continuance in such patterns of behavior as believers would risk death and exclusion from eternal life (6:21-23; 8:5-8, 13-14). Paul is quite emphatic in Rom 6:14-8:17 that he is applying this message to believers (“you”), not just to unbelievers. The same is true of the context of 1 Cor 6:9 where the overarching issue is the case of a believer involved in an incestuous relationship (ch. 5) and where the analogy of joining the members of one’s body to a prostitute refers to a believer indwelt by the Spirit of Christ (6:12-20).

What shall we say? Well, if we follow people like Peterson and Hedlund we shall have to say that Paul did not have a good grasp of the distinction between law and grace. But this is preposterous and, I might add, turns the entire Reformation on its head. Paul’s views coincided with Jesus’ views. If anything, Paul was more law-free than Jesus, not less—Paul spoke of the abrogation of the Mosaic law; Jesus did not. It is we who have truncated the gospel of grace by voiding its connection to a transformed life in the Spirit. Anyone who contends on the basis of a Pauline (or Lutheran) law/gospel distinction that attention to keeping the commands of God, especially as regards sexual behavior, is a legalism that subverts a gospel of gracious redemption has not understood Paul (or the Reformers).

Paul insisted that what matters is “keeping the commandments of God” (1 Cor 7:19) and did so within a broader discussion of sexual purity (1 Cor 5-7). Paul emphasized to the Corinthian believers what grace and redemption are for:

Flee *porneia*. . . . The one who commits *porneia* sins against his (or her) own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit in you, which you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Cor 6:18-20)

What price? The price of the precious blood of Christ. To what purpose? To glorify the God who now owns us, body and soul. What we do with our bodies sexually is an essential part of what it means to “present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing to God” (Rom 12:1). Why? Because “sin shall not exercise lordship over you; for you are not under the law but under grace” (Rom 6:14).

VII. The Divorce-and-Remarriage Analogy

Peterson and Hedlund complain that have a double standard about homosexual practice on the one hand and divorce/remarriage on the other (pp. 6-7 of their part 2). But different treatment of the two issues is justified by Scripture and church practice.

A. Violation of structural prerequisites as greater offenses. Scripture itself does not put homosexual unions and divorce on the same level of severity. Jesus' statements on divorce-and-remarriage were designed to close remaining loopholes in the law of Moses, not to suggest that divorce-and-remarriage was a more serious infraction of divine norms than having sex with one's mother, sister, or daughter; adultery; same-sex intercourse; and bestiality. There is a big difference between the dissolution of a natural union and entrance into an inherently unnatural union that violates God's creation ethic. Both Paul and Matthew provide for limited exceptions to the prohibition of divorce and remarriage in Jesus' teaching. However, neither would have granted exceptions to a prohibition of homosexual practice. The kinds of extenuating circumstances that exist for divorce, which might mitigate an absolute prohibition, are not comparable to the kinds of extenuating circumstances alleged for homosexual practice. Some people can be divorced more or less against their will or may seek divorce only after the partner has in effect already dissolved the union through serial unrepentant acts of adultery or serious spousal abuse. These are very different circumstances from an active choice to enter a homosexual union, which Scripture regards as grossly incompatible with structural, embodied existence and which choice is not coerced or accompanied by a threat of violence.

So Peterson and Hedlund complain: "Same-sex fidelity is a worse sin than opposite-sex promiscuity." Note how he recasts divorce and remarriage as "promiscuity" and omits the fact that divorce and remarriage are usually one-time and rarely more than two-time acts over the course of life. At any rate, it's basically true: both are sins but homosexual practice is worse. But it is more accurate to say: Grossly unnatural (i.e., structurally incompatible) sexual acts, whether committed or not, are worse than infrequent divorces and remarriages, which create otherwise natural heterosexual unions. In Scripture's eyes, the male-female paradigm was so sacred that violating it was considered a major sacrilege against the Creator who ordained it from the very beginning. Jesus' criticism of divorce and remarriage was predicated on the sacredness of the inherent logic of the twoness of a male-female bond, ordained by God at creation. His view of divorce and remarriage was merely the *inference* from the sacred *premise* of a two-sex requirement for sexual unions. Homosexual acts of any sort would have appalled the authors of Scripture and Jesus. Peterson and Hedlund don't have a grasp of this most basic of points in the Bible's sexual ethics.

To draw an analogy, I'm sure that Peterson and Hedlund would agree that having sex with one's mother or adult sibling is a worse sin than infrequent divorce and remarriage too, even when measurable harm cannot be proven for the incestuous relationship. Can you imagine a church treating a faithful and committed sexual relationship between a man and his widowed mother as comparable to a person getting divorced and remarried?

Of course, Peterson and Hedlund will contend that the incestuous relationship in question produces inherent measurable harm—to which I say: prove it. If the two close blood relations love each other, are adults, are committed, and are taking proper birth control precautions, how is measurable harm going to be proven? By their distress? What if they don't feel distress? Or what if whatever distress they might feel is due to intense societal incest-phobia? How else is harm going to be proven? By establishing that it makes them socially dysfunctional? But what if they can continue to function effectively in the work force and have social networks at least with people who aren't offended by the incestuous quality of their bond? How then are Peterson and Hedlund going to prove measurable harm? Of course, the answer is: They can't. They are left with a vague but powerful sense that a certain degree of blood unrelatedness is one of those irreducible minimums of sexual relationships, irrespective of whether measurable harm can be proven. There is simply too much structural sameness on a familial level, what Leviticus calls having sex with “the flesh of one's own flesh” (18:6). And that is the problem with same-sex intercourse, only now on the level of sex or gender. Indeed, homosexual practice is arguably a greater offense than a loving incestuous union because it violates a more foundational creation standard. However, Peterson and Hedlund don't want to admit that there is a problem with incest that transcends the question of measurable harm; for if they did admit it, then it would lead inevitably to a realization of what is problematic about homosexual behavior per se.

Scripture clearly doesn't make exceptions in its prohibition of homosexual practice and incestuous unions for monogamous, committed unions. Why? Quite simply because *the structural prerequisites have to be met before issues of fidelity are considered*. Scripture doesn't want people in an incestuous or homosexual union to be committed to that sinful union or to stretch out the union over many years. It wants immediate disengagement from such a sexual union. In the case of the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians (specifically, a man and his stepmother), Paul didn't start by asking: Do they intend the union to be committed and monogamous? It didn't matter. Sex with one's mother (and, by extension, with one's stepmother) is so offensive an act that any “fidelity” associated with it is quite beside the point. The same applies to homosexual practice.

B. Why remarriages are not like homosexual practice. Dissolution of remarriages replicates the problem with divorce and is thus no solution. However, dissolution of homosexual unions does not replicate the problem with homosexual unions (i.e., its same-sexness) but rather corrects it. While remarriage may not be God's initial will there is no evidence that Jesus felt that remarried persons should dissolve their second (or third) marriage. The reason is obvious: The problem with divorce is that it dissolves a natural marital bond. To require dissolution of a second or third marriage, a union that in its heterosexual character is otherwise natural, would be to restart the cycle of dissolution that was the problem to begin with. Consequently, the church rightly does not counsel a second (or third) divorce but rather a renewed commitment to a lifelong union. However, Scripture is not reluctant to command the dissolution of an inherently unnatural union that does not meet the structural prerequisites of sex, age, or degree of blood unrelatedness. The primary problem with such unions is not the absence of longevity and commitment but rather the presence of longevity and commitment to a relationship that is

structurally unsound. Continuing in inherently sinful and unnatural behavior does not improve the moral quality of that behavior; it merely regularizes the sin. Homosexual behavior is wrong because it involves a union with someone who sexually is a structural same rather than a sexual counterpart. Dissolution of such a union does not exacerbate that problem but rather appropriately ends it.

This point helps to explain the speciousness of Peterson and Hedlund's argument that sex in a second marriage is as much serial unrepentant sin as a homosexual relationship. Again, the analogy of an incestuous union makes the point. Moreover, the main problem with divorce and remarriage is not the number of times that sexual intercourse is had but the number of partners. It is precisely the reverse for unnatural unions involving persons of the same sex or close blood relations. The main problem is the number of times that sexual intercourse is had; each act, regardless of the number of partners, is a violation of a structural prerequisite. This brings us, then, to a better way of formulating a parallel between divorce/remarriage and homosexual practice.

C. A better analogy between divorce/remarriage and homosexual practice. Since society and certainly church do not encourage multiple divorces and remarriages, a better analogy with participants in regular homosexual practice would be with persons who have been divorced and remarried fifty times or more, who think that this cycle of dissolution is a good thing, and who plan on continuing in that cycle for the rest of their lives, hopefully with the fewest negative side-effects. Any sin can be forgiven but all sin must be repented of. That is the point of contact between divorce/remarriage and homosexual practice. The issue is whether the behavior is repetitive and unrepentant. Divorced persons should commit anew to stop the cycle of divorce and remarriage. Homosexually active persons, like persons engaged in incest or polyamorous behavior, should commit anew to stop the structurally discordant behavior, here specifically sex with persons of the same sex. Just as society and certainly church work to end the cycle of divorce and remarriage, so too they should work to end the cycle of homosexual behavior. It is inadequate to say: But we do want to end the cycle of *promiscuous* homosexual activity. For neither do we say merely: We should end the cycle of *promiscuous* incestuous or polyamorous activity. The structural incongruity of same-sex intercourse remains even when the promiscuity stops.

For further discussion of the divorce/remarriage issue, including an explanation of why Jesus probably would not have commanded a remarried couple to dissolve the union, see pp. 110-22 of my article, "Are There Universally Valid Sex Precepts? A Critique of Walter Wink's Views on the Bible and Homosexuality," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24 (2002): 72-125 (also available [online](#)).

VIII. St. Paul and the Exploitation Argument

Would St. Paul have opposed loving homosexual unions? Peterson and Hedlund argue "no" or "not likely" but there is no historical or textual basis for this position. Here's why:

A. *The Genesis 1 echo in Romans 1:23-27.* As noted above, Paul clearly echoes Genesis 1:26-27 in his critique of idolatry and homosexual practice in Romans 1:18-27 and cites Genesis 2:24 in close connection with his reference to male-male intercourse in 1 Corinthians 6:9. That means that the standard used by Paul for assessing homosexual behavior was not just how well or badly it was done in his own cultural context but whether it conformed to God's will in creation for male-female pairing. Paul, then, obviously thought that the primary problem with homosexual practice was not what it happened to be in his particular cultural context but rather what it wasn't and could never be: a structurally congruous joining of the two sexes, male and female.

B. *The nature argument in Romans 1:26-27.* Paul's nature argument in Romans 1:26-27 ("their females exchanged the natural use for that which is contrary to nature; and likewise also the males, having left behind the natural use of the female . . .") is not the kind of argument that lends itself to a distinction in Paul's mind between good and bad forms of homosexual practice. Nature for Paul here refers to material structures of creation, still intact despite the fall of Adam and still giving evidence for God's will even to those without access to the revelation of Scripture. This is precisely the point made in the parallel discussion about idolatry in 1:19-24; namely, that humans (here primarily Gentiles) are culpable not merely for sinning but, more, for suppressing, and thereby sinning against, the knowledge of the truth accessible to them in creation structures. Thus Romans 1:19-20 emphasizes:

The knowable aspect of God is visible (or: transparent, apparent, evident) to them because God has made it visible to them. For since the creation of the world his invisible qualities are clearly seen, being mentally apprehended by means of the things made.

For Paul the sin of same-sex intercourse provides the perfect complement on the horizontal level to the sin of idolatry on the vertical level. For, like the sin of idolatry, it involves the suppression of truth that should be obvious to all by means of the "things made," here the complementarity of our gendered bodies in terms of genital fit, physiology (including procreative capacity) and various interpersonal features distinctive to men and women. Female-female intercourse and male-male intercourse are "beyond nature" (*para phusin*), contextually in the negative sense of being "contrary to" or "against nature," because they "dishonor" this self-evident complementarity of male and female "bodies" through a bodily incongruous union with a structural same. The issue of exploitation by having sex with a minor, slave, or prostitute is simply beside the point of gender incompatibility.

C. *Exchange, mutuality, and lesbianism in Romans 1:26-27.* Other features of Romans 1:26-27 rule out a focus on particularly exploitative behavior. (i) The wording of 1:26-27 regarding "exchanging" and "leaving behind" the other sex for the same sex is absolute and clearly inclusive of all same-sex sexual relations: "their females exchanged the natural use . . . and likewise also the males, having left behind the natural use of the female, were inflamed with their yearning for one another, males with males . . ." What is the point of Paul charging males with "leaving behind" sexual intercourse with "the female" and females with "exchanging" natural intercourse (with the male) if his

indictment is aimed solely at an exploitative subset of same-sex unions? Would he not rather have to say that they exchanged or left behind loving consensual relationships with a person of either sex? This is precisely what he does not say. (ii) In fact, the wording in 1:27 stresses the mutuality of affections: “. . . were inflamed with their yearning for one another” (similarly, 1:24: “their bodies being dishonored among themselves”). (iii) Further, the mention of lesbian intercourse in 1:26 does not fit with a focus on intercourse with prostitutes, slaves, and adolescents, since in the ancient world lesbianism is neither known nor critiqued primarily for such practices.

In short, there is absolutely nothing in Paul’s denunciation in Romans 1:24-27 about an absence of loving commitment. “Passions of dishonor” (1:26) clearly refers to passions to engage in a sexual “use” or function of the body that is “in deviation from nature” (1:26), namely, a use in which females exchange intercourse with males for intercourse with females and, likewise, males leave behind intercourse with females for intercourse with males (“males with males,” 1:27), thereby “dishonoring their bodies among themselves” (1:24). The notion put forward by some (e.g., David Fredrickson, Dale Martin) that Paul is only concerned with excess passion (cf. “inflamed in their yearning” in 1:27) and not with the gender of the participants gets Paul’s critique backwards. The sequence of thought for Paul was not: Same-sex intercourse is excess passion; therefore it is wrong. It was: Same-sex intercourse is wrong; therefore it is excess passion. The concept of “disoriented desire” logically precedes the concept of “inordinate desire.” Indeed, how would one know to define a given passion as excessive apart from some prior understanding about what is wrong with the behavior in question?

D. “Soft men” and “men who lie with a male” (1 Corinthians 6:9) in historical and literary context. The terms *malakoi* (literally, “soft men”) and *arsenokoitai* (literally, “men lying with a male”) in 1 Corinthians 6:9 also do not suggest any kind of restriction to exploitative practices. The sense of *malakoi* as “men who feminize themselves to attract male sex partners” is evident from: its place in the vice list amidst other participants in illicit sexual intercourse, its pairing with the immediately following word *arsenokoitai*, Philo of Alexandria’s use of cognate words, and instances where the parallel Latin word *molles* is used to refer to effeminate *adult* males who are biologically and/or psychologically disposed to desire penetration by men. The complaint about such figures in the ancient world generally, and certainly by Philo, centers around their attempted erasure of the masculine stamp given them by God/nature, not their exploitation of others, age difference, or acts of prostitution (see, for example, Philo, *Contemplative Life* 59-60, and *Special Laws* 3.37-42 and *On Abraham* 135-6).

The word *arsenokoitai* is a compound formed from the Greek words for “lying” (*koite*) and “male” (*arsen*) that appear in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Levitical prohibitions of men “lying with a male” (18:22; 20:13). The rabbis used the corresponding Hebrew abstract expression *mishkav zakur*, “lying of/with a male,” drawn from the Hebrew texts of Lev 18:22; 20:13. This way of talking about male homosexuality is a distinctly Jewish and Christian formulation, undoubtedly used as a way of distinguishing their absolute opposition to homosexual practice, rooted in the Torah of Moses, from more accepting views in the Greco-Roman milieu. The appearance

of *arsenokoitai* in 1 Tim 1:10 makes the link to the Mosaic law explicit, since the list of vices of which *arsenokoitai* is a part are said to be derived from “the law” (1:9). That Jews of the period construed the Levitical prohibitions of male-male intercourse absolutely and against a backdrop of a male-female requirement is beyond dispute. For example, Josephus (a first-century Palestinian Jew) explained to Gentile readers that “the law [of Moses] recognizes only sexual intercourse that is according to nature, that which is with a woman. . . . But it abhors the intercourse of males with males” (*Against Apion* 2.199). There are no limitations placed on the prohibition as regards age, slave status, idolatrous context, or exchange of money. The only limitation is the sex of the participants. According to *b. Sanh.* 54a, the male with whom a man lays in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 may be “an adult or minor.” The term *arsenokoites* and cognates after Paul (the term appears first in Paul) are applied solely to male-male intercourse but, consistent with the meaning of the partner term *malakoi*, not limited to pederasts or clients of cult prostitutes.

This absolute and inclusive sense is further confirmed not only by Paul’s longer treatment of male-male intercourse in Romans 1:27 (“males with males”) but also by the broader context of 1 Corinthians 5-7: the parallel case of incest in ch. 5 (which gives no exceptions for committed, loving unions and echoes both Levitical and Deuteronomic law), the vice list in 6:9-11 (where the sexual offenders are distinguished from idolaters, consent is presumed, and a warning is given to believers not to engage in such behavior any longer), the analogy to (and not identity with) sex with a prostitute in 6:12-20 (where Gen 2:24 is cited as the absolute norm and the Christian identity of the offender is presumed), and the issue of marriage in ch. 7 (which presumes throughout that sex is confined to male-female marriage).

E. Caring homosexuality and universal critiques in Greece and Rome. The Greco-Roman milieu of Paul’s day supplies us with two additional reasons why Paul’s opposition to homosexual practice was not grounded in a perceived absence of loving commitment in homosexual relationships. One reason is that the conception of caring homoerotic unions existed in Paul’s cultural environment. For example, in Plato’s *Symposium* Aristophanes refers to males who are “not inclined by nature toward marriage and the procreation of children, yet are compelled to do so by the law or custom” and must “live their lives out with one another unmarried.” When those who are “fondly welcoming that which is of the same kind”

happen upon that very person who is his half . . . they are wonderfully struck with affectionate regard and a sense of kinship and love, almost not wanting to be divided even for a short time. And these are they who continue with one another throughout life. . . [the lover] desiring to join together and to be fused into a single entity with his beloved and to become one person from two.” (192)

Similarly in the much later work, the Pseudo-Lucianic *Affairs of the Heart* (ca. AD 300) Callicratidas defends love for males by arguing, in part, that “reciprocal expressions of love” between a man and his young male beloved reach a point where “it is difficult to perceive which of the two is a lover of which, as though in a mirror. . . . Why then do you reproach it . . . when it was ordained by divine laws . . . ?” (48). There are numerous

examples of committed homosexual love in antiquity (see texts in T. K. Hubbard, *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*). Had Paul and other Jews of the period opposed only unloving kinds of homosexual unions, they could easily have made the distinction in their writings.

The second reason for recognizing the absolute quality of Paul's anti-homosex indictment is that, as T. K. Hubbard notes in his sourcebook of ancient Greek and Roman texts treating homosexuality, the first few centuries (AD) "bear witness to an increasing polarization of attitudes toward homosexual activity, ranging from frank acknowledgement and public display . . . to severe moral condemnation of all homosexual acts" (*Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*, p. 383). He adds: "Basic to the heterosexual position is the characteristic Stoic appeal to the providence of Nature, which has matched and fitted the sexes to each other" (p. 444). Such arguments transcend the issue of individual exploitative acts and reject homosexual acts categorically. For example, Plutarch's friend Daphnaeus admits that homosexual relationships are not necessarily exploitative, for "union contrary to nature does not destroy or curtail a lover's tenderness." Yet, he declares, even when a "union with males" is conducted "willingly" it remains "shameful" since males "with softness (*malakia*) and effeminacy (*thelutes*) [are] surrendering themselves, as Plato says, 'to be mounted in the custom of four-footed animals and to be sowed with seed contrary to nature'" (*Dialogue on Love* 751). Similarly, "some kind of argument from 'design' seems to lurk in the background of Cicero's, Seneca's, and Musonius' claims: the penis is 'designed' to penetrate the vagina, the vagina is 'designed' to be penetrated by the penis" (C. A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality* [Oxford, 1999], p. 242). The second-century (AD) physician Soranus (or his fifth-century "translator" Caelius Aurelianus) characterized desires of "soft men" to be penetrated by other men as "not from nature" insofar as they "subjugated to obscene uses parts not so intended" and disregarded "the places of our body which divine providence destined for definite functions" (4.9.131). Part of Charicles' attack on all homosexual practice in *Affairs of the Heart* is the assertion that male-male love is an erotic attraction for what one already is as a sexual being (cited above under D.).

Knowing the universal disdain among men for lesbianism, Charicles culminates his argument by saying that, "if males find intercourse with males acceptable, henceforth let women too love each other" (28). Opponents of homosexual practice also often employ a variety of exploitation arguments, as do modern apologists for a two-sex prerequisite when they allude to disproportionately high rates of harm attending homosexual behavior. Nevertheless, they clearly add an array of arguments that strike at homosexual activity per se: an appeal to nature, the anatomical and physiological (e.g., procreative) incompatibility of same-sex unions, arousal for and merging with one's already intact sexual nature, blurring or erasure of essential maleness and essential femaleness and an indictment of all lesbianism. It makes little sense to assert, then, that Paul, operating in a Jewish milieu known in the ancient world for its vigorous opposition to homosexual practice, was someone more affirming of homosexual practice than Greco-Roman critics.

In conclusion, given these five arguments, there is absolutely no basis for claiming that Paul's rejection of homosexual practice did not have in view all homosexual activity. A

number of scholars supportive of homosexual practice acknowledge this point (e.g., Dan Via, Walter Wink, Bernadette Brooten, William Schoedel). As Louis Crompton puts it in *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge, 2003),

According to [one] interpretation, Paul's words were not directed at "bona fide" homosexuals in committed relationships. But such a reading, however well-intentioned, seems strained and unhistorical. Nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of this period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations under any circumstance. The idea that homosexuals might be redeemed by mutual devotion would have been wholly foreign to Paul or any other Jew or early Christian. (p. 114)

IX. St. Paul and the Orientation Argument

Would Paul have been opposed to homosexual practice by homosexually oriented persons? Again, Peterson and Hedlund say "no" or "not likely." Again, there is no basis for such a position in the historical and textual evidence:

A. Ancient sexual orientation theories. Greco-Roman theories (Platonic, Aristotelian, Hippocratic, and even astrological) existed that posited at least some congenital basis for some forms of homosexual attraction, particularly on the part of males desiring to be penetrated. These theories included: a creation splitting of male-male or female-female binary humans; a particular mix of male and female sperm elements at conception; a chronic disease of the mind or soul influenced indirectly by biological factors and made hard to resist by socialization; an inherited disease analogous to a mutated gene; sperm ducts leading to the anus; and the particular alignment of heavenly constellations at the time of one's birth (see my article, "Does the Bible Regard Same-Sex Intercourse as Intrinsically Sinful," in *Christian Sexuality* [ed. R. Saltzman; Kirk House, 2003], pp. 140-52).

Some of the ancient theories are obviously closer to modern theories than others. Differences, however, are beside the point for our discussion here. What matters is that many in the ancient world attributed one or more forms of homosexual practice to an interplay of nature and nurture; and, moreover, believed that homoerotic impulses could be very resistant to change. As T. K. Hubbard notes, "homosexuality in this era (viz., of the early imperial age of Rome, AD first century) may have ceased to be merely another practice of personal pleasure and began to be viewed as an essential and central category of personal identity, exclusive of and antithetical to heterosexual orientation" (*Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*, p. 386). He also points to a series of later texts from the second to fourth centuries that "reflect the perception that sexual orientation is something fixed and incurable" (ibid., p. 446). It is important to add here that many of the same Greco-Roman moralists and physicians who held such views could still oppose the behaviors arising from homoerotic predispositions. They could do so by distinguishing, as one Aristotelian text puts it, between behavior that is in accordance with nature and behavior that, though given "by nature," is yet "constituted contrary to nature" as a "defect" (*Problems* 4.26).

B. Why an orientation argument would have made little difference to St. Paul.

1. Was Paul aware that at least some homosexual desire was not a matter of personal choice? As with Philo of Alexandria, **Paul was probably aware of the existence of a lifelong homoerotic proclivity** at least among the “soft men” (*malakoi*) who, even as adults, feminized their appearance to attract male sex partners (1 Cor. 6:9). In addition, nothing in the language of Romans 1:24-27 suggests that Paul viewed homosexuality solely as a chosen condition of constitutional heterosexuals. The expressions “exchanged” and “leaving behind” in 1:26-27 do not refer to a willful exchange of heterosexual desire for homosexual desire, as Peterson and Hedlund mistakenly believe (p. 4 of their part 2). Rather, they refer to a choice of gratifying innate homoerotic desires instead of complying with the evidence of male-female complementarity transparent in material creation or nature. In fact, the terms “exchanged,” “leaving behind,” “God gave them over,” “desire,” and “inflamed with their yearning” in 1:24-27 collectively suggest passions that are preexisting, controlling, and exclusive.

2. Even exaggerated claims about “homosexual orientation,” particularly notions of congenital determinism and absolute immutability, are compatible with **Paul’s view of sin** in Romans 5 and 7. Sin for Paul was an innate impulse to commit actions prohibited by God—an impulse passed on by an ancestor, running through the members of the human body, and never entirely within human control. If St. Paul could be transported into modern times and told that some homoerotic desire may be due to partial congenital causation factors (which is the most that we can say at the present time), what we know about Paul and his cultural environment suggests that he could either “I suspected as much” or at least “That fits well with my understanding of sin.”

3. If **some Greco-Roman moralists and physicians**, operating within a culture that tolerated and at times endorsed at least some homosexual practice, **could reject forms of homosexual practice committed by those with a biological predisposition**, it is virtually impossible that Paul, operating out of a Jewish subculture, would have embraced homosexual unions entered into by homosexually oriented persons. Nor could one charge Paul with logical inconsistency if he, aware of something akin to homosexual orientation, did not acknowledge homosexual desire as “natural” in the best sense. For, as noted above, the ancients rightly recognized that not everything that has an origination in nature is natural in the sense of conforming to nature’s well-working processes. Persons’ deeply ingrained sexual desires can be at odds with their embodied sexuality. (A pedophilic orientation would be an instance that all could agree on today.) For Paul, too, nature meant something structurally broader than innate desires: the transparent structures of creation, including essential maleness and femaleness in their anatomical, physiological, and interpersonal complementarity.

Even Bernadette Brooten, a New Testament scholar who has identified herself publicly as lesbian and has written extensively on lesbianism in antiquity, admits that knowledge of homosexual orientation would have made little difference to Paul’s absolute views on homosexual practice (and, by extension, the views of Jews everywhere in the ancient world):

Paul could have believed that *tribades*, the ancient *kinaidoi*, and other sexually unorthodox persons were born that way and yet still condemn them as unnatural and shameful. . . . I believe that Paul used the word ‘exchanged’ to indicate that people knew the natural sexual order of the universe and left it behind. . . . I see Paul as condemning all forms of homoeroticism as the unnatural acts of people who had turned away from God” (*Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* [Chicago, 1996], p. 244).

X. Core Value

The most important point to be made about the biblical witness, and one that is consistently missed by Peterson and Hedlund, is that an other-sex prerequisite for sexual relations is no more an isolated or insignificant view in the canon than is opposition to man-mother incest or even bestiality (the latter is mentioned fewer times in Scripture than homosexual practice, not at all in the New Testament). Every narrative, law, proverb, exhortation, metaphor, and poetry that has anything to say about sexual relations at least implicitly presupposes a male-female requirement. There is no dissenting view in Scripture. Rather, the witness of Scripture holds this value pervasively, absolutely, strongly, and counterculturally. In other words, it is a core value of biblical sexual ethics. The love commandment cannot serve as counterweight to this overwhelming witness inasmuch as Jesus’ sexual ethic, as with that of Scripture generally and even modern Western culture, has distinctive structural requirements that transcend any generic obligation to love. These distinctive features are attributable to the fact that a sexual relationship is not merely intimacy in depth but an actual merger of two into “one flesh.”

Conclusion

I believe that this presentation of the witness of Scripture demonstrates the groundless and baseless character of Peterson and Hedlund’s repeated charge that my “heterosexist” perspective has led me to distort what Scripture has to say about homosexual practice. Rather, it is they who, out of a desire to legitimate a form of behavior that Scripture categorically treats as immoral, have twisted the biblical witness to coincide with an immoralist ideology.